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Also by Leslie A. Fiedler

NO! IN THUNDER

LOVE AND DEATH IN THE AMERICAN NOVEL

AN END TO INNOCENCE

THE ART OF THE ESSAY (editor)

Pull
Down
Vanity

and other stories

Leslie A. Fiedler



J. B. Lippincott Company

Philadelphia and New York



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TO MARGARET

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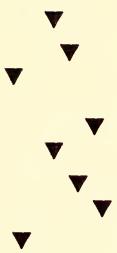
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The Teeth

C

hildren, dogs unnerved him. And the sun, inimical (he had forgotten his dark glasses, of course), found the narrow treeless gap of the street, his pale watery eyes. It was the last anguish of the sun, Warren knew, but the motionless coming of dark would be no better; open windows and the noise of fans would not tease from the brown, fading air coolness; and faces all night, leaning from windows, would breathe out, audibly and with effort, the pulse of their sleeplessness.

Meanwhile, they were all outside: the shrill kids and runty dogs (but their shrillness broke against the persistence of heat), the shirtless fathers watching the brief rest of their hairy arms, the flushed women in doorways, their supper dishes done, not daring to think yet—sleep.

It was as if the airless houses had been turned inside out, and Warren had the sense of trespassing before each stoop; a hundred privacies gave sullenly before his invasion. Each time, the children

would stand fixed in the attitudes of their interrupted play, grudge insolently his passage, forcing him to brush against their sweaty shoulders—and then, behind him, the sound of the ball, the scuffling breaths, the cries. And the warm parents would raise toward him their eyes, indolent, curious; their faces would turn toward his coming, hold him in precise focus as he passed their doorway, follow his back until his going released them to weariness or whatever dream survived the atrocious summer.

He had the feeling that they mocked him in whispers: his stooped shoulders, his finicky gait, the flickering gestures that he could not suppress as he debated with himself his venture; and he began to limp a little to confound their contempt, compel pity. It was still near enough to the war's ending so that they might think . . . With his reverie, his limp had grown more exaggerated until he rolled grotesquely on the tide of evasion and self-pity; but he became suddenly aware of another stare, incurious, mocking surely, almost malicious.

It was a boy, fourteen, perhaps fifteen, who leaned against the railing between sidewalk and house, resting; his mouth had dropped open and his unnoticed breath broke from it dog-like, *hunh! hunh! hunh!* Each of his arms was humped backward over a rail, his head dangling limply on to his chest between shoulders thrust up and forward so that he might have been a hunchback; it was impossible to say for sure. But the metal leg-braces, all fluid and luminous in the last sun, and the surgical shoes were unambiguous. This Warren could not hope to deceive; he blushed.

"Hey mister, gimme a nickel, mister!" The boy called the words casually, almost mumbled them, turning his head oddly up against Warren's face from beneath, and reaching one cupped hand forward without releasing his arm from the supporting stake. How he exploits his distortion, Warren thought, as if he had invented it, and not merely suffered it as an affliction. "Obscenity!" he told himself and he did not waver.

"Hey mister, mister!" A little louder now, so that Warren could not longer pretend he did not hear. Just beneath his own face swam the face of the real cripple, blurred from focus, but the

sweat visible, the fat quivering tongue, the knowledge of his fraud. He knew!

"Gimme a nickel, mister!" the dim face insisted (not begging now, *demanding*) and one eye winked, wrinkled in mocking complicity. Warren walked away from the boy, faster, faster, forgetting to limp in his embarrassment; and then, sensing that to leave off would seem a confession, a surrender to that petty blackmail, threw himself again into his burlesque gimpy gait. Behind him he could hear the creak of leather, the ticking of metal against the pavement, as the boy took up the chase: "Hey, mister, gimme a nickel! Hey mister!"

Warren did not look around, but he could feel the absurdity of the scene, man and boy parodying each other down the street that swarmed and closed about their strange intimacy. Who was the mocker, who mocked in that lopsided pursuit, he could no longer tell. Someone laughed and he began to tremble. In a moment the cripple would touch him.

He almost yielded then, paid for the offensive coincidence the price named; but when he wheeled nervously, a nickel in his hand, the boy automatically winced, ducking behind the protective crook of an elbow. Warren had not intended violence, but he could not refuse the cue of that habitual response. "Get the hell out of here!" he shouted in his thin, tremulous voice. "Go on! Beat it!"

It sounded in his own ears as if he were reading someone else's lines, but the cripple stopped short, swaying against the palpable closing dark. "A penny, mister. Oney a penny, mister."

"Beat it!" Warren yelled, furious at the whole comedy, his fraud and shame, and now the uncustomary bout of violence in the unmitigated heat, "or I'll call a cop."

"Awrr," the boy said, retreating slowly, "I didn't do nothing."

And Warren moved from him, his head jerking with the renewed emphasis of his limp, almost jaunty (a sense of victory moved him dimly) against what was now night; but his hands trembled and the nickel slipped from his damp fingers into the shadowy gutter. The boy, humped again over the railing, did not notice.

Out of the cripple's sight, Warren stopped to mop his forehead, the backs of his hands, his neck with a large white handkerchief that he flung from him abruptly, disgusted with its dampness. His heart thumped idiotically in the interior dark of his breast; he felt its blind thud with the gesture of one about to sing. "Imprecise engine," he addressed it secretly, "knock it off!" Looking closely, one could have seen his lips move, but the casual watcher noted only the operatic gesture without context. "Thumper, thumper, be through!" he concluded and spat into the friendly rubble beside the curb: a dented orange, a toy auto without wheels, an inexplicable puddle, and his abandoned handkerchief (perhaps the nickel).

He had known, and then retreat had been still open, that he should not have come: (a) The neighborhood—behind the sober drabness of these streets one sensed an ulterior hysteria, as if some doctrinaire insistence, dreamed in walk-up third-floor flats, compelled them toward illicit metaphors of bohemia and retreat. (b) It was hot, hot. (c) Those girls must be, or they would not have asked him, fools. (d) He had forgotten his own Article. But now under his shame and elation, he shuddered, trapped; he, for whom everything must be *said*, had come upon a story ("And in the end, the nickel lay in the gutter and I could not have found it in the dark"), and he would have to go up to the girls, waiting though not for this, and confess. He hoped they would be, at least, amused.

Laying on hands, he cured his brief lameness, walked quickly to the address he had jotted on a scrap of paper and oddly not lost. Only the expected ignominy of submitting to the absurd myth of himself that three strangers might hold, bore him up through the ambush of heat (it had waited all day for his coming), the dense expectancy of the dark passage of the stairs. Furtive lights emphasized the dark at each of the four landings, and in their glimmer the ruined pattern of the wallpaper eluded him like the meaning of his venture.

What rank odor in the variety of that stagnant shaft reminded him, he could not quite tell, but some smell brought back to him with unforeseen vividness the beginning of his Article, the piece

whose uncertain thesis had prompted the awkward letter which had compelled his coming:

The ultimate alienation: between the self and the face. From God we are cut off by an accident of existence: we are, He is not.

How he had pondered whether to capitalize that pronoun, and how few would relish his decision on the proper convolution.

Our neighbors elude us by discontinuity of substance. But our faces, whose existence a toothache or tic confirms, continuous with our knowledge of them, are utter strangers. Lies. The gross jowl, the split lip, the maloccluded teeth . . .

He touched the teeth in his pocket, and with the first premonitory glimmer of the jest, memory of those words died from him. It did not matter; the Article had seemed once a superior sort of a joke, but it was hard now to recall his exact relation to the ideas. He remembered that he had got thirty-five dollars for it from the charming and foolish lady (rich and no poet) who had started *The Mask*, another Little Magazine, a better hobby, he thought, than psychoanalysis, or—but those were, he discovered, the only two indulgences of wealthy females he could, in the heat, call up.

The first issue had presented a mildly related series of essays on the theme of the title: "God as Mask," "The City as Mask," etc. He had wanted to do "The Mask as Mask," but even drunk, the charming lady had demurred. He had settled for "The Face as Mask," reserving its irony for private consumption, relishing as always the misrepresentation of himself. For he knew that in the end no face lied; even his own brooding rat's profile, his dim eyes were meanings he could not deny.

But it was into this Article that the three girls had read the evidence of spiritual kinship that had prompted their letter. Warren would not permit himself to remember precisely any of its phrases, but he felt again in his flesh the stilted desperation of its appeal, the cry of imagined recognition, and "Desolation!" he said aloud on the last step.

"What? What?" the voice cried from below, and Warren realized that through his meditation it had been shouting (bored, im-

patient, always delicately nasal), "Who's there? Who's there I say! Who's there?" He had rung a first-floor bell for the answering buzzer that released the hall door, not wishing to advise the girls of his coming. He preserved the fiction of choice, would not admit he had dissipated all possibilities of retreat. "Is there anybody there?" the voice tried again, and Warren crouched back against one wall, panting, enjoying for a moment the play of concealment and flight. "What the hell," it said wearily, "kids!" and a door slammed.

He was at their door now, and he bent to read their forgotten names in the faint light leaking through where the door had warped from the frame. Hilda Reznick (that was it; he had written on a postcard, not quite sure why, "Dear Hilda, I shall be there. W."); Rose Banf or was it Bamp, some truncated un-name not decipherable in the near-darkness; Bea Goodside; and he bowed even further forward to listen for a little. In the moment of eavesdropping, crouched and intent, he seemed at prayer.

"Ub-bub soon?" someone said.

And "How about the drinks?" someone else.

And the first again, "Ub-bub-buh." They were too far from the door, and were speaking quietly in the first hush of the evening. It had hardly been worth listening.

As he rose, disgusted, his fingers went again to his pocket, rediscovering the teeth; and without time for decision he fitted them into his mouth, the gross incisors, secure on wires, lapping over his lip. It was as if he submitted to, rather than assumed, the disguise. The angle of protrusion, the size of the teeth were outrageous to a point just short of advertising their falsity, and his upper lip curled back from their marginal horror in a grimace of self-contempt.

He had bought them once in one of those Fun Shops, where among small boys coveting sneezing powder, exploding cigars, and stink bombs, he used to go to refresh his metaphors of malice and weakness. The teeth ("How to greet your mother-in-law," the box had suggested above a detached, toothy grin) had seemed to him a revelation, a completion of himself that his flesh had not achieved, nor his imagination foreseen. He touched almost guiltily his half-finished mouth, and then, with feigned indifference, the

teeth. These would be the point of his inconclusive ugliness: the stubborn pallor, the mouse-colored nap of hair, the faded lips redeemed from the nondescript. Craftily, he piled them with a pack of magic cards, a three-ring puzzle.

"And these?"

"Four bits, mister."

"O.K. Don't bother to wrap them." And as a final gesture he had pretended to forget the teeth, lingering outside the shop so that the storekeeper had had no trouble catching him.

He pressed the bell and, too quickly (they must have heard his scuffling), a dark, drastically corseted girl opened the door to his show of teeth.

"Oh," she said in soft amazement; and, gauchely dissembling her start, "I'm Hilda."

The other two girls had edged up close behind her, and sick at heart before their assembled ugliness, he stopped at the doorway, unwilling to commit himself to their acceptance. "It is a mistake, a mistake," he thought. They would never understand the equivocal mockery of his disguise; before their homeliness, uncomposed and self-conscious, the teeth were simply—an insult. He had a vague sense of repetition, his day proposing its meaning in alternative symbols.

When he had moved, after all, a little forward into the room, the three girls stirred uneasily, rearranging themselves like bric-a-brac that would simply not fit, but could not, for the sake of some unknown obligation, be cast off. They had waited all day, prepared to flinch at the inevitable offense of his glance; but they had claimed, half incredulously as at the granting of a prayer not even confessed, his teeth as a warrant of acceptance. He knew that Hilda's first "Oh!" must have been a timid cry of hope, not the baffled shock of others on whom he had tried this same absurd disguise.

"No," he cried silently, irked that he would not be able to make the final gesture of removal. He trembled at the monstrous possibilities of offense, but, "I shall wear them to the end," he decided; and warm with the appreciation of his own subtle generosity, "They shall never know."

Embarrassed at his long silence, Bea said, "You didn't ring." She looked at him up to the moment of speech, and then, with the air of avoiding a consummation, down at her stumpy legs.

"The door downstairs was open," Warren explained, and with his first lie he felt established, at home.

"Mr. Pease," Hilda began, "won't you—"

"Please," he said, "that was only a pen name, a joke. Warren Pease. Tolstoy, get it? I make, I am afraid, jokes."

He looked so melancholy as he said "joke" that they did not even dare to laugh at their own obtuseness. Bea, who had begun to titter, pretended she had been all along only clearing her throat, and ended in confusion, looking down at the fold of flesh that hung like a jowl where her ankle met the counter of her shoe.

"It's poor—a poor pun," he went on, "and that, you see, is the real point. To make simply such an—an affront, would be boorish. But to *know* it is boorish, and on the convolution of knowing it, make it—that—"

He stopped to smile; with those teeth it was a gesture open and confiding as exposing a shameful sore. "And besides, my name is really—Plotkin!"

This time his mope of comic disdain permitted their laughter and, assured, they reached toward him with a tentative and unaccustomed tenderness. Even Bea, who had stood against him with an air of baffled aggression, as if before a male she were cheated of her proper role, wrinkled her boneless nose at him in a grimace that might have meant welcome. "Sit down, Mr. Plotkin."

"Not Mr. Plotkin—Warren, please!" He sat down (as if waiting this signal, the girls arranged themselves about him) in the single large chair, and taking a huge ornamental flask from an inside pocket, began to drink. "Scotch," he said after a long swig, perspiring freely. "Would you care for some?"

"We have gin or rum," Hilda said, moving her chair closer to Warren's, indicating to the others perhaps that she would now take the lead. "We thought on such a day something cool—" Her

"th's" rang against her teeth with a shower of spit, giving her an aspect of clumsy eagerness he found somehow touching.

"I dislike gin and rum, and especially—ice."

Though they could no longer be wary before the naked failure of his face, they did not seem able in any essential way to begin.

"You don't like ice?" Bea asked.

"I don't like ice." He would give them no opening until their meaning had grown for him clearer. He invited silence in the familiar room whose books and pictures betrayed to his quick glance only the clichés of choice; the prints of Rouault and Chagall, the volumes of Kafka and Dostoevsky, the files of little reviews charted the intellectual fashions of their world, not them. He felt ashamed before that astonishing joy and despair become —a uniform.

But the anonymity of the room, its pat evasions of loneliness, had been disrupted by his coming. It had now the raw, bruised look of habitual untidiness too thoroughly and quickly ordered. He knew he was inadequate to the apparent weight of his expected coming; only some subtle and stupendous insult could right the balance—

"That flask looks like 1920," Hilda said, insisting on her nearness.

"Those were my happiest days; I was young then." His face revealed that he could scarcely have been born then; this he knew —and again silence.

All day they must have cleaned and scurried, prepared. Even the positions they had taken up must have been argued, arranged: Bea and Rose on the studio couch facing him, Hilda next to him on the chair that was too small for her, the place of honor. She was bent forward, elbows on her knees, and in the vee of her slack breasts he could see a heavy fuzz of colorless hair; she must, in a gesture of hopeless vanity, have peroxided it. Catching his eye, she blushed and sat up, and he blushed with her (it was one of his few natural talents), tapping casually his protruding teeth. Whatever gambit they had prepared was lost in hesitation and visible sweat.

"Hasn't it been *hot!*" Rose whined, pushing at her limp hair, and Bea nudged her with one buttock, glaring: to talk like some debutante of the weather! There was a husband-wife ferocity in the rebuke, and he knew then that they must be finding in each other counterfeits of love. "Excuse me." Rose got up hastily, obviously in need of a place to cry. "I'll get our drinks."

"Your article," Hilda plunged in desperately. "It was that—but we already wrote—we see so few people really, but we *knew*—"

He could no longer resist the appeal of her gracelessness; without small talk, or manners (he knew their mean history; they had sat six or seven at a time before the dean of their municipal girls' college to learn "poise," and scorning even the hope had grown hoarse and emphatic on soapboxes for causes in which they no longer believed), or charm, they could not compel love or remit boredom.

"No! No!" he said. "Not now. Let me tell you first what happened to me walking over from the bus. There was a paralytic, a grotesque animal, a beggar—an *affront*" (the word suggested itself to him whenever he paused) "to normality—" They listened, puzzled, eager, ready if he gave them an opening, for gratitude. There was a sense of having begun. Rose, her face clean and swollen, stood in the doorway with a tray, not daring to set it down lest she interrupt his flow of narrative; her trembling hand sloshed the rickeys over the rims of the tall glasses.

"And when he began to limp, with an offensive hobble, down the street, I followed—imitating him." (He had not meant to lie; deeper exigencies than truth compelled him.) "He hobbled, I hobbled. He whined, I whined. He stopped, I stopped."

Rose was appealing over his shoulder for forgiveness, but Bea stolidly avoided her eye; only Hilda listened without reserve, leaning, leaning toward commitment out of her wariness.

"But he was a comedian, that boy. Finally, he turned toward me, unable to escape, too weak to strike me down, and reaching into a greasy pocket, took out a nickel. 'Here, bub,' he said, 'you need this more than me.'"

"And what did you do?" Hilda asked, watching his eyes, avoiding tenderly the grotesque appeal of his teeth.

"I am a philosopher," Warren said, his story obviously over. "I took it."

"Why," said Hilda, slowly, "you've been lying—that's a lie—" Warren smiled modestly, nodding her on. "—A joke—a parable—"

"A myth," Warren whispered to himself. It was scarcely audible, but Hilda, her attention unwavering, picked it up.

"A myth," she said, "and the meaning I know. I *know*, but to say it, I can't say it."

"Is it absolutely necessary, Rose, to spill *all* the drinks before we get them?" Bea rose to take the tray, and Hilda, disconcerted by the diversion, glanced at her in contempt, but briefly, as if unwilling to leave for more than a moment her scanning of Warren's face.

"For every beggar, there is a more absolute beggar," he suggested. "The Chinese have a saying: below below there is below. And for every indignity there is that beside which it is dignity. Only chosen deformity, deformity *willed*, what is called stupidly 'false,' is ultimate." He spoke with no intention of being understood, mumbling and looking out the window at the first stars, but he could not discourage the vast uncomprehending attention of Hilda. She paused to show respect for what he had said, and turned to her own concern.

"Your article—it was not only the beauty of the sentences, the words. But we knew when we read it, that you *understood*. The spirit trapped in gross flesh," she indicated her own lumpy body with a despairing wave of the hand, "the *suffering*; and for the heart there is only this obscene apparatus, no instrument, no way of saying what it must, of being what it *is*. No way except, perhaps—love." Her voice had grown lower, less sure with each phrase, and the last word was lost completely.

"Except perhaps—what?" he cried impatiently. "Talk up!"

"Love!" she said more distinctly. "Love!" She bent further forward, her head down, until he could see once more the fur between her breasts, dewed now with sweat, heaving with her audible breath.

He felt bludgeoned by her clumsy tenderness. She made no

gesture (she knew none) of approach, but the baffled innocent hunger of her eyes oppressed him. She demanded modestly the merest token of regard, but in return unleashed the great shapeless assault of, she had named it rashly, her love.

Better, he thought, for her to have endured the meager lustless embraces of Bea and Rose (she looked up at them now in muted triumph, as if to say: You see, there is also *this*) than to have exposed herself to the certainty of his insult. He grew furious with her for shaming them both, for the openness that compelled his revulsion, for the foreseeable end of their encounter.

Trembling, he wiped his brow, neck, the backs of his hands with his second handkerchief and flung it through the open window beside which he had been sitting. Hilda arose and looked down the dark shaft into which his handkerchief had fallen. From there sparse music came suddenly into the room, mid-phrase, as someone below turned on a radio.

"Heat!" he cried in disgust. "Everything else is a lie."

Rose looked up at the word, turning vaguely from him to Bea, to see if his cry had redeemed her earlier remark. She fumbled once more at her lank hair.

"I must go," he said unexpectedly, tapping his watch. "It's nearly nine."

"But that's early!" Hilda cried.

"Another appointment—"

"The refreshments—all those—we worked so—" Rose whined.

"Oh, sh! You fool!" Hilda hissed, and to Warren, "But we haven't—"

"We never shall," he answered. "Another appointment, another face." And with no sense of willing it, he turned from them, plucked at his mouth and wheeled back toward their surprise, his face without the expected teeth scarcely known.

In the few seconds that remained and after the grotesque hyperbole of his disguise, they must have believed him really handsome, secure, an utter cheat, assuming in jest what they were irredeemably and forever. He did not cry out as he might have: "*That was the truth; what you think you see now lies,*" and how were they to know? Saying merely, "Good night," he was through.

the door before they could, from their sick awareness of betrayal, move or make answer.

He stamped noisily down the first flight of stairs, and tiptoed swiftly back to listen for the last time at the door. They must have stood as he had left them, clustered about the point from which he had departed, for he could hear them clearly.

"Buffoon!" Bea cried. "I knew immediately—"

And Rose, "Men—they're all the—"

But "Oh," Hilda sobbed, "oh, it was impossible. The very walls rejected him! Oh Rose, dear Bea!" They fell together weeping and repeating to each other the happy phrase, "The very walls rejected him!"

On that he moved away, softly, softly, nursing the sense of triumph that dogs or children, an unseen laughter in the night, would dissipate, feeling down the dark well of the stairs his talisman, the teeth. Later he would dream, in the half-sleep of heat, that when he had tugged at the teeth, they would not come away.

The Fear of Innocence

I came without music to the street, the house, the door; unsure, I waited while the bell made its catarrhal squawk in the imagined inner cube of dark and quiet. There was no footstep, no tremor, no pulse of answer; and I noticed then the newspapers and milk bottles at my feet. Three days, I figured, or four, but before the thought could form “Carrie’s gone away”—I smelled her.

I had come through the city I hated to that remembered square, pretending to falter at each turning as though I had forgotten the way. There was no reason, after all, that I *should* have remembered so long, so precisely, the circumstance, the setting of what had been no more than a minor embarrassment.

It offended me, but not deeply enough for forgetting, that Carrie’s apartment should in the logic of the case be just there: among the kitschy jewelers and within sight of that other, the larger Square where as a boy I had indulged my anguish among bootblacks and a few uncertain trees. One could watch from

Carrie's windows, I knew, the façade of the school where I had fumbled inexpertly with patience and rage; but no one watched. I had seen from the street before entering the blinds pulled tight against the sun in the windows I guessed were hers, and I knew I had only imagined their trembling.

I would not accept the city, walking it in the blue and gold uniform I no longer had to wear, mark of my choice now and not the regalia of the last choice but one; for accepting it, I would have had to surrender my sense that at the moment of discharge, between two areas of allegiance, I was as I had never been, free. It was hard for me to believe that soon, soon I would submit again to the ruinous empire of work, habit and discontent; harder to believe that at thirteen or fourteen I had learned down these very streets obedience without love, the meaning of the state, my drawers bunched under my sweating buttocks, and in each of my hands, wet and creased under the rope's fretting, a roped bundle—thirty-six lashed-together boxes, in each right shoe and left face to face, conjugally in the secret tissue.

And some who had brushed me, or opened soft and heedless as water for my passage, were dead.

I did not stop by the store windows that had made for me once small ecstasies: the pawnshop's grille of iron and behind, between saxophones, the yellow, incredible diamond; or the fronts of picture shops where no one seemed ever to enter (the boy at the glass could fancy them mere scenic flats for his eye's beguiling, with beyond perhaps only the gray field between blind walls and the goat cropping iron), and always in their clutter the same goose nibbling a child's pecker over the joke in French, or the miraculously opening eyes of a Christ in chromotone, an easy benediction, if the light lay right, for the squinter. Stopping, I might have seen on the depthless glass my furtive image, not the boy's face I continued to imagine behind the mere somatic changes of my other—that no pilgrimage, no piety could evoke.

I should not, I suppose, have come back at all to the door, the unforeseen milk bottles and the smell, except for meeting Dan, and Dan I should not have met had I not—but that way is a regression to the six days of creation or beyond. I had met Dan

where all my parallel impulses of violence and pity, evasion and longing, had improbably intersected, at sea and moving toward invasion.

We had been playing medicine ball at the butt-end of the afternoon, contemptuous of the water's slope and shudder, on the open deck space below the bridge, when I first noticed Dan. It is a game, you know, of immense intimacy and aggression; and one soon senses who has too much at stake, standing close enough to smell each other's sweat, to see the drops hang quivering on the furrow between nose and lip; marking what grunt betrays the overinvolved prestige, what crisis of breath is cued by fear and not fatigue.

The gross *whack* of the unyielding ball, slippery with one's own slipperiness, the faces hung with their rigid smiles of comradeliness between the hunched, inimical shoulders, the ritual of deception and assault, Dan could not abide; and his unwillingness to hide his terror and contempt, to let his beefy shoulders and his stubborn jaw deceive us, seemed a provocation.

He declared himself the natural enemy of our heartiness, and once on to his ill-kept secret, what could we do but smack the ball into him, harder, harder; to whatever hands he threw, from whatever quarter, the moist flushed head would move toward him with an unpitying jerk, a snap of outward breath, and the sodden leather bulk would be back before his own breath into his gut. Away—back; away—back! I could see a nerve beat to the compulsive rhythm in the hollow back of his right knee, his wrists tremble meaninglessly, and his eye, shifting with the motion of the ball, his shameless fear. Back—back!

I had chosen, in a surrender to sweat and childhood, to join the brutal conspiracy below thought, below the will, at the sweet muscular level of aggression; to punish the insolence of weakness, the possibility I had not chosen, seemed enough. But, amphibian at heart, I had moved before I knew it at his nerve's quivering, back to empathy, my other element. I let the ball fall from my fingers with no attempt at conviction, and as I fumbled after it

toward the rail, I could hear Dan escaping. "Guess I'll get a shower and sack out." And after him, the shouts of the others that confessed nothing, "Good game! Some workout!" would let him believe only in the random insights of dreams that he had there known terror.

He knew though what I had done and claimed me as a secret comrade and ally with a quiet certainty I could not dismay. He would wait for me, silently reading in my bunk or leaning against a bulkhead, as Baldy and John and I played cribbage, ignoring our conventional obscenities, and refusing the drinks we occasionally offered him with some embarrassment; or when I went into the wardroom for a cup of coffee toward dawn after a night of poker, I would find him dozing over a pile of letters stacked up before him with nervous precision, the edges of stamp and envelope parallel. "Well," he would say, "well—" and we would be off again.

Over the green tops of the tables through the endless fury noise of the ventilators, and at the rail, our eyes on the waterline where the classic, melancholy swell ("Sehnsucht," Dan would say, his sole word of German, to the sea's susurration, "Sehnsucht!") that had moved unbroken from beyond the rim of our seeing, was lost at last in a frivolous welter against our side, we talked and talked.

He was a writer, of course; that is to say, a certain breathless faith in self-revelation, a flair for exploiting his own meretricious boyishness had survived in him a year of writing scripts in Hollywood. "I had to get out of there. They were killing the Real Me!" For the sake of this pseudo-innocence, he deferred adulthood (though, quite inconsistently, he would make the motions of cynicism he had confused with it), remained fixed in the callow gesture of amazement and emulation to which all his stories recurred.

"By God, Pa," he had said after his first year at Harvard (and one was left to imagine the shy or hopeful seediness of the father he would never describe, but whose continual embarrassed approval he could not spare), "the greatest brains of the world are in

this hall!" He could never, I knew, though he laughed telling it, do more than apply compulsively for admission into that boy's fancied fraternity of wit and achievement.

Hal (I had not remembered to avoid that memory) had been just so at first, struggling with the naïve terror of his naïveté, I realized watching Dan, though Hal had had no father, had avoided with painful deviousness the very word. Oh, certainly he would lie if one pressed the subject, with a lazy insolence: dead here or perhaps—there, mad, in jail; some offhand fable, not even the fantasy of evasion, the mere careless rebuff. And I had come to play for him in those early days (there must have been others after), by grace of my year's seniority, what he lacked: the provincial father, dazzled, mocking a little, but essentially approving. Later, even a thousand miles removed and alienated in belief, he had kept after me in letters to be reluctant, to assent; and at last when all other possibilities were lost in bitterness, to exact the father's possessive, abused silence.

Hal had gone to Harvard, too. Harvard: you will find it hard to understand, perhaps, the precise magic of that name for us, high-school kids in an ungenerous world, shaken in those years of economic crisis (when about the table still, thank God, desperately abundant, we read in our parents' eyes the threat of grosser deprivations, the bleaker ennui of the declassed) not to loosen, but to grasp more frantically our mean security: the clipped scant hedges, the stone lions on the stoop, the alarm clock ten minutes fast. Harvard: it had mocked and dazzled us, the legendary tweeds and flannels, the soiled saddle shoes, the undergraduate apparatus of graciousness, and the promise that there might be a casualness not *lumpen*, an ease, perhaps, not sin.

We had talked about it, in the conventional weak banter of the almost-poor, who desire not simply to possess but to despise, while we still sucked our ambivalence with three-cent cups of ices on the stone stoops; and under the long evenings of summer, would break off our discussions of the difference between a horse and a man to beat the kid who farted aloud until he shouted three times, "Watermelon, watermelon, watermelon!"

But we were marked already for the few months at City College

and the surrender to weariness, or, at best, the Midwestern school where the restaurant job awaited us and the stereotype: Easterner, Red, Jew, perhaps even the recognition of an expulsion deplored by the *New Republic*.

Later, when our longing had grown too sophisticated to ignore its ambiguities, it was Harvard that served as the other pole to the Young Communist League (we did not dream then those fashionable Popular Front days when revolt, well-groomed, was to be the simple piquancy of convention, and those who cried "Choose!" seemed political schizophrenics): the University or the Revolution, success or rebellion, both dear to us and difficult; if it was not a real option, it was not ignobly imagined.

"The Movement" we called our left allegiance in a shockingly unanalyzed phrase; how parochial in retrospect our ethical imagining; how strait the either-or we proposed and could not escape. *The Movement*, the epithet, all kinesis and no commitment, echoes in the enduring head like a reproach.

The Movement, though, was more than the poor metaphor that persists: the symbolic flirtation at least with denying the whole universe that defined our intolerable exclusion, our outsideness—set against the counter-urge to belong, to infiltrate, become at that world's center the definition of *its* alienation.

It was a pretty irony for boys, but in the end a mask for accommodation. We might have known it from the first, for it was with our real names, those comic-elegant tags the Jews have worn almost to anonymity, Rose-tree or Verdant-hill, that we enrolled in colleges or filled out forms for jobs; but in the Y.C.L. we wore, we almost were, those jocular, half-scared fictions, the Party name, the assumed name of a stranger, Robinson or Flint or Smith, oblique confessions at the heart of our revolt, of our secret hunger to belong.

But Hal, Hal only of us, got to Harvard, as he fulfilled all our immature velleities in that perilous damned role he came to play, our scape-hero, as it were; as if something, vindictive or full of secret grace, who knew, were bent on making patent to us what tribulations and fatigues we might have achieved, granted literally the best that boyhood could desire. And Hal, at last, like the folk-

tale butt with the sausage on the end of his nose, could use the last wish of his splendid luck only to unwish it all, unwish himself to that terrible table, to the solution of cancer. But before we learned what he had been meaning, he danced and dazzled, he taught us envy: went first to Europe, was laid first, first published, first unwilling innocence.

I asked Dan one night on deck, as we leaned to the water that lit our leaning faces with the glow of its cold carapace, if he had known Hal. He had, of course, had paid him court in that room in Eliot House where Hal and Goldberg (you know the name, doubtless, that young composer whose unembarrassedly obvious work is much in favor now) had made in their small circle jokes, nursed the motives of their power, imagined temptations, prepared.

There Dan had received the initial notice of a witty insult, and had come, in course, to sit on the bed's edge or in the angle of wall and wall; to live past the cold periphery of their laughter into its excluding core of warmth. When a new face came afterwards through the door, he could not avoid remembering a little his beginnings, his unbelonging, but he never spoke of it, succeeded in forgiving himself his first ingenuousness, though he was *proud* always of that original insult, for he felt more identified with Hal than with the boy who had not known him. He was, in short, a Disciple, disturbingly for me, Hal's disciple.

"I knew him well," he said, but his memories were actually few, abstract, confused with himself. "Terrible the way he died. A waste!"

"You knew him in Hollywood, too?"

"I seldom saw him there (*pause*), but we did meet a couple of times. He was unhappy there, all the (*pause*) Isherwoods and Swisherwoods! He was the best of us. Did you (*pause*) know Goldberg?" I mark the pauses for you because they were so unforeseen and irregular; he gave to them the weight of words, saved his gestures for them, odd, dislocated gestures. In the end, one had the impression of a sort of transcendental punctuation or

even of a code of silences that carried a message he dared not openly confess.

I did not know Goldberg, and had no hope in that shallow gambit of reminiscence anyhow. I should almost have preferred talking politics despite Dan's sentimental Stalinism, which, illiterate and obtuse (as Hal's had been, though I was able to believe his would not have persisted, in this desperate willed paranoia, through the events since his death), saddened me; while my own refusal to make the expected responses of liberalism drove Dan to the degree of embarrassed exasperation that, behind his sort of face eventuates in blushing and biting of the lip.

"Why are you ashamed when you refuse a drink?" I asked him. I thought I knew, but one had to begin somewhere and I sensed there, though I was willing to leave its working out to the dialectic of conversation, a clue.

"I was going to ask *you* what you thought of (*pause*) Hal's stuff. Why do you change the subject?"

I could not tell him that the subject had been decided in nights he had no way of knowing, that I could not let him deviate from his role, deputy for the dead; for his sense of himself, his pride inhered in other meanings, alien to me; and our first encounter had given him the advantage of the insulted, made it impossible for me to practice on him the slightest nuance of personal offense.

"Hal had no integrity," I said instead, "if you will allow that somewhat simple-minded word. Not that he was ever bought by anybody outright, you understand, for he'd always half-sold himself before the offer was made. He was an outsider to the crassest kind of commercial stuff, only as a child is, that is, he was dishonest ineptly. That clumsiness he tried to pass off as honesty—but a little practice and he began to pass unnoticed among the hacks, keeping only a minimum of stridency for sentimental reasons, nostalgia."

"You're a coterie (*pause*) writer, jealous of his ability to be popular. Popularity is no crime; the trick's (*pause*) to sell them what they don't know they want. Look at Howard (*pause*) Fast."

"I forgive you the interruption. I was going to say that stridency is not truth; it's not even a guarantee of earnestness, and I can't admire (*you brought it up*) the sort of cunning that slips across a currently unpopular brand of philistinism."

"You're talking about politics, I suppose."

"Yes, a sneaky kind of politics, literary politics, this business of hijacking bourgeois notions, and proving that it's just as comfortable—and dull, on your side of the barricades. If you only—"

"I (*pause*) suppose you don't like Steinbeck." He moved his face over against mine until we were mutually quite distinct despite the blackout.

"No."

"Ah—that's the (*pause*) test. That's the test."

We changed our course violently and before the quasi-automatic bend of the knee had made an adjustment, our viscera rolled with the baffled surge across which we were cutting, trying to escape the body's changed momentum that moved now with the ship, making with all engines its perpendicular to where the guts had thought they were going.

"Why are you ashamed when you refuse a drink?" I asked him again.

"Oh, Jesus," he said, "you can't make a case of it. I don't want any (*pause*) one to go thinking that I have scruples against drinking aboard ship. It's just that at (*pause*) sea, I get sick if I—"

"What are you afraid of anyhow? What would you betray if you seemed virtuous for a moment? You ought to have scruples against it. I do. It's against Navy Regs, and even, though I grant you it sounds like a contradiction, against good sense. It's undemocratic besides, because the men can't do it, and it's—"

"But *you* do it," he cried unawares; and then, embarrassed, "Not that I care one way or the other. What the hell—"

This time I beat him to the pause. "You're scared of your most hopeful reactions. Give them a chance. I know you didn't choose your naïveté, but you're lucky, it sticks to you. Exploit it! exploit it! because if you don't it will fester on you, make you a special superdamnation. Did you ever hear of the theory of Uneven Development?"

"That's some Trotskyite theory, isn't (*pause*) it?" He said it in a tone of intended rebuff, but he had no faith in it; he was trying it on for size.

"Can't you see, it's just your innocence that makes you a push-over for propaganda, however sleazy and unsubtle, against innocence. You can't make a career of innocently hating innocence, nor a subject matter of its callow denial. And one thing's sure, you amateur Machiavel, you can't blink *my* sins out of existence, whatever you do with your own."

It must be clear to you by now (I did not intend to conceal it) what motivated my feeling and my speech: the need to make the record once more. For there I had been granted what death had seemed to deny, the possibility of saying what I could not leave off wanting to say; once more, once more to explain, and this time perhaps what had been wounded would be healed; this once at least words might eventuate in understanding.

It was to Hal I spoke (how precisely, had I lied to that old woman when I told her that I believed in his ghost? But that was the riddle of my pilgrimage) on that unforeseen deck, as I had spoken on streets I could scarcely remember through nights whose motives had become as alien to me as history. Dan was no Hal, after all, but there seemed reasons to subpoena him for the role, to externalize my long lonely debate as chance allowed, in whispers and without lights. In the end, he made quite an acceptable ghost.

"Esoteric crap," he said, "I won't buy it."

"You're trying," I told him, "but you just don't have it in you, not real offense, not the arrogance of Hal; and maybe it'll save you, just that lack, for all your posturing; twist the arm of your insolence till you yell, 'Save me!' No, not that ultimate, lucid, unconvertible arrogance, not the arrogance of the Jew—"

That hurt him, and I must after all have intended it. Having chosen his way of somewhat chic dissent, Dan fell inevitably among Jews and they (any Jew sensed it in a moment) offended him; not at any level where reason could amend or learned tolerance temper the distaste, but at a tribal depth of aversion immune to argument, almost beyond the grace of confession.

His consequent self-distrust conditioned his whole political program, touched it with hysteria, until it seemed a function of his disguised uneasiness, an apology continually tendered for a complicity never admitted.

"Jewish—oh Lord, not *Jewish!* What you call arrogance, what made (*pause*) lesser people uncomfortable about Hal—is self-knowledge, certainty of power, the hallmark of the great writer al(*pause*)ways, always, the supreme insolence of Milton, of your precious (*pause*) Joyce!"

In a way it was true; and I was sickened, not at the poor logic of the epigone that takes the master's flaw as central to his success, but at our common lot that flaws the noblest animals of us all. We were both embarrassed then, he at the unforeseen rejoinder of silence, and I as when some gauche stranger touches in his fumbling spite the unconfessed focus of one's disgust with the loved, corrupt family.

I did not answer but submitted to the power of the night that we patterned briefly with our wake, and to the arched lovely failure of the water from our sides, *our* failure, the unutterable dark falling of us all.

In combat Dan did not act well; he seemed to need the confirmation of anecdote for an essentially unmotivated depth of anxiety, and he would report each day outrageous casualties ("Oh, I've seen the official figures, but—"), confide unrecorded monstrous errors of command, unconfirmed deaths of people we knew and half-knew. "You remember *him*; he was leaning against the Coke machine the night we played (*pause*) chess. Both legs! To the groin!"

His stories were never true; some unconscious scruple kept his fantasies pure of fact, except as oblique allegories of his own despair, and that, to be sure, the rest of us shared in varying degrees, so that we hated him for making clear to us our own grounds for self-despite.

"Jesus, old skull-and-bones is here!" someone would yell at his approach, and we would dash off on suddenly remembered errands. Sometimes I could summon up a kind of sympathy for his hunger

in that ill-defined untidy violence, for precise distress; but he vulgarized past all participation what he felt, falsified at last his essential self.

We moved in different directions after that operation, and it was fourteen months before I met Dan again in the Officers' Club at Pearl Harbor. We scarcely paused to greet each other, but leaped viciously and with deliberation into a political argument, while drunks carefully piloted their flushed, impervious heads between us, or howled across our recriminations, recognitions and farewells.

I was a little drunk myself, for I was going home, but scarcely drunk enough to excuse me. I slipped off for the bar and a drink in the midst of one of Dan's ungainlier sentences, and when I'd managed to get back through the crowd that would yield me headway only as the begrimed resultant of its own gay, purposeless thrust and heaving, he had disappeared.

Dan is not his name. I should in any case have had to call him for the story's sake some name not his; but I swear I do not remember, though he cued my pilgrimage, brought me to that door and my beginning, what he was really called.

II

I was still drunk when I got to Frisco, drunk enough to take the curse off the land's rigidity; the pavements without resilience, the inelastic rigor of the horizon seemed to roll with me; the eye was slaked in its own humors. The foot has an unexpected nostalgia for oceans; it is easy, you know, walking a deck to time the stride so that the whole dark, spongy mass of the sea seems to sink with the foot's falling, rise at the release of the sole's pressure.

But it is not only the illusion of mastery of what one walks that is lost leaving water; the lines are heaved on to the splintering dock with its colloidal fringe of garbage in oil-slick, are made fast; and one declares to the uniformed inquisitor that he returns to arid cities and the accustomed flora of his childhood bearing only (a) one Jap pistol (decommissioned), (b) three rolls of silk (red), (c) two ounces of perfume (cheap) in the carved Koa wood container. With so slight a confession, one is shriven, perhaps forever,

of the Proustian ennui of the sea, its architecture of terror, the loveliest uses of leisure and solitude.

As always at one point of my drunkenness, sweating out toward nausea the inevitable binge of coming ashore (for one cannot move directly ever from shipboard to the landsman's land you others possess without effort, but must pass, as the sandhog upward from muck to daylight, through the decompression chamber of the sailor's city: the whitewashed store fronts behind which one gets a bath for a quarter, the unambitious whores, the fourteen-year-old world's champion tattooer, the joints—and over all the shuttling passage of gulls. But it is not all defined by the waterfront; it invades your quiet territory and you do not know it. In the washrooms of stations where you make the train of your daily homecoming, the homeless drunk swabby flushes his face with water, slaps it, leaning so close to the mirror that his forehead bangs the glass lightly to the rhythm of his blows; or where you stop for an after-theater drink, the place with mirrors, some j.g. slips absurdly off his stool, but you do not laugh, being polite and almost sober), I could not help remembering my first time drunk: Hal had taken me to Carrie's house for dinner, to the center of his secret, and afterwards we had opened the liquor.

I must have been sixteen; I remember I was reading the *Critique of Political Economy* and Aragon's *Red Front*, just then Englished by E. E. Cummings (we passed it hand to hand under desks in geometry class; the teacher was myopic, scared—and we who, with indifferent zeal, wrote stories about the *rive gauche* and poets and pernod, or at lunchtime yelled "Hug-a-dick!" from the second-story windows of our school, despised her), still preferred ice cream to beer, myself to both, and shaved once a week the intolerable boy's mask of my face.

Carrie (we called her that only in the bootlegged jest, and, despite this whole history, I cannot write it yet without a sense of secret insolence), Miss Carrie Overbury Stone, had been my Latin teacher; she was a specialized type, a specimen rare then and that does not now, I think, survive, except in the jokes with which some no longer young revenge the pieties of their adolescence. There was in her a quiet core of faith in authority, an assured ex-

pection of obedience and respect that gave those abstractions we were desperately challenging, in her bland, firm presence, an irrefutable status which we could not afford to remember behind her back.

To be sure, one can sense now the motives of respectable poverty that drove her, the trivial story of a family suddenly gone, the lover dead, and the slow accretion of boredom and inarticulate wretchedness as the days that did not move, moved without love through the regimen of bells, the chalk and the young faces, anonymous under their youth and their ignorance of death, toward death.

But as deep as our eye went then, she seemed a triumph of function over flesh, as if she had composed herself to the tailored pattern of her role out of one of those bags of useful scraps women keep for mending. From beneath the careful repose of her face, she surged out magnificently to an undivided shelf of bosom, then dropped in an unruffled, gentle slant to the brief bifurcation of the legs beneath the discreet length of her skirt; one could imagine her only as homogeneous under the dark dresses, whalebone and silk and silk and whalebone as deep as one could go—certainly not real breasts or the legs cleft to the dark, living warmth of the crotch.

Carrie and Vergil are confused in my remembering; they impugn each other, the poet's cool, tenebrous elegance squandered on his incomprehensible allegiances (how could we who marched past the bored hostility of cops with banners, "Free Tom Mooney and the Scottsboro Boys!" or wrote the leaflets against war and fascism that they broke open our lockers to find, believe in the mysteries of a homeland discovered or the decorous sweetness of death in battle), and the insult of the teacher's yellow smile, unbearably tolerant of the boy's fumbled translation: "Not bad, but will you try next time, please—to *prepare* your lesson."

Even the cool tolerance was, we soon learned for boys only; the tentative equilibrium of adolescent girls was always in peril under Carrie's blue, ungenerous stare, that reduced all their gaiety, their motives of rebellion, their crowding of maturity to the mere evidence of an expected, gauche viciousness. She would bait the

girl who faltered or turned to the calling of her name a face still meshed in some soft, trivial reverie, gently smile that incredulous smile, wait in silence and with the offensive composure that no kid can attain or outface, until there welled up in the victim, after the start to attention, the excuses—tears! Then while the door still swung gently after the retreating girl, whose heels we could hear, distinct in the empty corridors, running, running—Carrie would turn her bland gaze back to the rollbook, to us. “Well—Miss Kaufman, are you with us? Line twenty-three, please. *Agnosco veteris vestigia flammae.*”

Or sometimes when we looked up suddenly, while one of us was turning into the unlanguor of recitation the quandary of the Hero, his imperatives elsewhere and son and comrade to remind him, but his flesh trapped in the cave with the hot Queen to whom he was no more than what she fondled (Oh Lord, we could not know yet how it concerned us; footnoted by scholars and parsed by virgins, the text seemed foreign to what we were after in the parked car, pushed silently down driveways while our fathers slept, the warm, damp, inexpert fretting toward a consummation scared and unconvinced: “Well, got my ashes hauled, dunked the love-muscle,” the smug, depreciatory metaphor), we could see that Carrie had slipped noiseless from the room, left unbroken the mechanical train of translation.

“That day first of joy and first of evils the cause was—was the cause; nor indeed by appearance and by reputation moved, not now secret love Dido meditated—no longer did Dido meditate secret love: marriage she called it, and with this name covered—uh—‘*culpam.*’” The reciter paused and queried for the word’s forgotten meaning the desk whose emptiness he now first noticed.

“‘Sin,’ you jerk!” someone whispered from behind him.

“Yes, ‘sin,’ ” Carrie repeated at the door again, “though perhaps ‘blame’ would be better or ‘guilt.’ ‘*Culpa*—guilt,’ it’s a word that should be familiar to you all by this time.”

We knew where she had been, had learned to note in a slight sucking-in of her lips the confession of triumph. The odor of cigarette smoke had reached her finicky nose from across the

hallway, and she had pounced, caught in the girls' toilet some furtive smoker. We could see how, under her eye, disinfectant as the deodorants that purged that gray room, the blithe adult nonconformist had shrunk, while the lip-stained cigarette whirled, soaked and shredded in the toilet bowl, into the small girl, frightened and insolent; and our hum and titter as Carrie settled behind her desk was a kind of contemptuous applause that she acknowledged hushing it.

But Carrie had fallen in love with Hal. Hal who was in her class then, lean, with those pale eyes that showed in photographs blank and smoky as marbles, would walk beside me home from school, trying on attitudes, justifying. "Oh my God!" he would cry, striking his chest with the impossible Wolfe-ian gesture, and tilting toward the sky the head that might be, if it survived its apprenticeship, someday noble, "I'm not *laying* her, you know. I've only kissed her once." We stopped for Napoleons at a bakery shop, and our talk up the untidy avenue blurred in the cream filling and the flakes of dough.

"But you're a whore. That much is clear."

"All right, I'm a whore! A sweet, green revolutionary whore full of jism—a lucky, smart whore you'd give a complete set of Lenin to change places with."

"No—I don't think so. It's hard to be sure, but I really don't—" I was a damn sight more certain than I sounded, but I dared not say so; I dared not. I bang the desk now with that little muscle on the underside of my palm, grown tough from such banging, but I cannot redeem that pastness. Hal had taught me envy and envy unnerved me; when I had first met him he was writing little stories for boys' Sunday School magazines, and afterwards fishing pieces for *Field and Stream*; later there would be those deliberate compositions that would win prizes in national collegiate writing contests ("There's always a formula—any jerk can learn it, if he can learn anything!"), while I could still only hope that my continued clumsiness was the warrant of some scruple guarding from premature success a talent that would not die with the

boy's undifferentiated itching. And so I never dared open myself to the reproach of envy, to say simply, "It is wrong, *wrong*. I certainly would not do it."

I could not seem to advocate virtue, to play the pharisee for truth's sake even. Confined to the resources of the sneer, the blasé wink—or else acceptance, I ignored the possibility of saying, "I despise *and* envy you; let us forgive one another," but endured the rewards of callow pragmatism, tried in my embarrassment the kid's conventional irony: "Not me! I'm too young for such glory!"

"He's too young— He doesn't think so! All one-legged blasphemers of Jesus, he doesn't *think* so. Listen! You'd like the three volume edition of Proust boxed, a subscription to the *New Masses*, orchestra seats to a play every week and cocktails after the show—"

"Not a purely intellectual appeal, I see. The flesh is—"

But he didn't stop for my interruption; it was as if his demonstration that he came dear at least beyond the customary par of contempt depended not only on the sum of these items, but on the speed of the telling, the impact of their totality. "A new casting rod, concerts, operas, and—maybe (I'll have your testes if you tell this to anyone)—just maybe, Harvard!"

"And what's your quid pro quo, and how many fingers does it take?"

"Fingers! Fingers! the crudity of the rising generation, the filth of the mind beneath that fair exterior, that child's brow, that lamb's eye, that—Christ, I give her precisely—nothing!"

I laughed.

"Oh laugh, you bourgeois in disguise. The virtues of the untempted! I hold her arm; I sit next to or across from her; I smile. I kissed her once. Forgive me, Father!"

He stopped to do an elaborate version of what he took to be pious grovelling in the middle of the crowded sidewalk, and an old woman, half-blind behind her packages, careened off his rump.

"Madame," he whispered into her ear, stooping with her as she picked up her scattered oranges, "your slip is showing!" And she watched down the street the exaggerated motions of our

arms against the low sun. "Meshuggah," we could hear her mutter, "toit meshuggah, crazy ones!"

But I would not leave it. "You don't,"—I had a poor vocabulary for most things not insolent in those days; the traditional words that make ethical discourse possible I handled like obscenities—"I mean, don't you feel a demand on you for some reciprocal—well, to 'love' her?"

"I do not! Oh, I'm sorry for her in a way, but she's a mean and ignorant old bag, and you know it. It's enough I give her something to practice her dammed-up love on before it chokes her. Hell, how many sons love their mothers? Mostly I think she's old and scared, and now at least she won't have to die alone—she thinks."

Rehearsing this, I am able to believe that he must have loved her a little, that he lied out of that dark, trivial compulsion which drove him always to demean his motives, to seem rather thoroughly foul than a little the fool. So later when the Moscow Trials and Spain had made Stalinism impossible for anyone politically literate and no scoundrel, Hal continued grinding out for Radcliffe alumnae those soggy little morality plays at the end of which some hoarse Party functionary would appeal improbably for funds to keep the boys of the Lincoln Battalion in cigarettes; and to my explanation, my protests, he would turn a shrug. That shrug had grown for him his essential response, not the traditional Jewish shrug, sly, incorruptible, comic with its self-inclusive contempt, but a parody of that, mocking its mockeries, a little smug. "I know things aren't exactly kosher; don't be a chump! But who controls all the real channels of the kind of publication we're after. The Commies, right?" and his face, the boy scout as villain, would almost wink.

What tenderness he felt lived underground, confessed in signs I could not then read: perhaps the growing edge of irritation that flawed his voice, the cumulative failure of feeling in him and his compensatory rhetorical excess (he came to *shout* what passion he claimed, like some actor, deaf and blind, crying desperately his unheard lines to an audience whose presence he cannot verify); just so the guilt he would not otherwise acknowledge was betrayed

in the acne along his back that sent him periodically scurrying for the doctor's reassurance and the sun lamp.

Certainly he was brusque and condescending to Carrie that night I first had dinner at her house; his leg hooked over the arm of the chair, the precise casualness of the cigarette ash tapped off on to the rug's dead center mocked the anxious charm of the suburban apartment, the lonely terror of its tidiness.

When Carrie (Hal called her that insouciantly enough though never without a glance at me, while I, who could say neither that nor "Miss Stone," called her nothing) gave me in brief greeting her hand, I saw with a start of pity and repulsion, in the mottled flesh slack between her knuckles, the age the firmness of her face denied; and I could sense in the instant pressure an entreaty for tolerance shameful in its abandonment.

"Good evening," she said and I, "Good evening," and we sat in mutual discomfort, so patently the lay figures in a demonstration (She could foresee and fore-suffer, I suppose, the unremitting insolence with which Hal would continue to thrust upon their intimacy my arrogant young hunger for "material." He needed, for there was in him fatally a drive to turn what was most private into the Performance, the commandeered cognizance of my envy and contempt; and so we would play, whenever I returned to Carrie's house, a curious game, mutually unconfessed: looking for a manuscript, let's say, Hal would open a drawer, showing me over his shoulder his own pajamas obscenely folded away among Carrie's dark, familiar clothes; or he would leave slightly ajar the bedroom door, "Excuse us for a moment," behind which he was discussing with her his allowance; or he might set carelessly open on the table beside me the latest letter from Carrie: ". . . forgive a silly old woman, and when you've finished this, tear it up, scatter it to the ocean, leave my poor secret to the sea!" and I never managed to refuse to come, to peer, to endure the ignominy of eavesdropping), while Hal beamed at us and nodded and nodded and beamed.

The beginning of the evening was a history of failures at communication for all of us, and for me, the particular strange business of my hands; dry and inept they betrayed an embarrassment

my head surely did not share, and I watched them with a detached wariness, prepared to wince at their blunders, as at the gaucheness of friends one has at the last minute inadvisedly taken along on a visit.

"Carrie's just got back from a trip to Russia," Hal would begin.

"Yes, it was most interesting. I really think—"

"Oh for God's sake, not your political opinions, Carrie! The schoolmarm's summer abroad," and Carrie, silenced, would try to dissolve in the deliberate vagueness of a smile the clumsy act of aggression and her inability to resent it. Then, for a little, silence.

Or Hal would lean toward me suddenly, "A little different than Vergil class, eh?"

"Yes, a little different."

"A damn sight different."

"I can't get used to it." I unknotted my hands that had clasped themselves unwittingly in pointless, gnarled despair, "I can't get used to it."

"Carrie brought back some vodka," Hal said. "Pretty potent stuff, no crap. We'll try it later."

It seemed a prospect, a promise and I smiled for it. "I'd like to. I've never tried the stuff myself."

There was more, but it was no use; we finally turned to the bookcases, caressing the sleek new backs of the books Carrie had bought for Hal; in their dust wrappers still, all equally shiny and unabused, they seemed a little unconvincing, like the virgin array the local bookstore lends to the amateur dramatic group for its interior set; but touching them we evoked the hope that their bright, mechanical surfaces might some day be subdued to use. Meanwhile they remained merely—loot.

We could hear Carrie messing about in the kitchen as we looked, and that somehow kept our words sparse, our tone subdued, though Hal would make from time to time in the direction of her noises, a series of incomprehensible confiding nods and winks.

Dinner was good; we ate steak full of gross, sweet bloodiness, meat cut from the dark genital regions of beasts not butchered by pious Jews. Always at Carrie's we ate steak or shell-fish; what

to our believing grandfathers had been abomination, and to our rationalist fathers somehow still distasteful, had for us a delicate flavoring of the unclean, a charming *soupçon* of venial sin.

But the drinks were the evening's meaning and until they were in us we could not unspell our disparate tongues. We'd had a shot of Carrie's oldest rye before the meal, choking discreetly only a little, and red wine with the dinner and after, liqueurs, brandy, curaçao, benedictine, aquavit, not choosing one but some of each, then more—The new liquor cabinet was Hal's toy and we tried everything with secret belches and false cries of ravishment; afterwards we went back to the rye and then vodka straight and a little dubonnet, and then the mixed drinks. It made no difference; we disliked the taste of all of it equally and over us hung the fear of not getting drunk enough, of seeming to hold back.

Boys will drink anything in their anguished flight from childhood, but our elaborate and jejune fall was motivated by more than the mere impulse to leave no sense virgin, more even than the simple hunger for evil—the sickening sweet plunge toward absolute abdication of the will.

You will not believe, perhaps, how little we said to each other in those preliminary stages beyond the necessary common denominator of requests and acknowledgments.

“Rye?”

“Yes!”

“Gin?”

“No!”

“More?”

“Please!”

More audible than speech, our breathing, the creaking of a chair under us, the sound of ice and glass, flesh and wood possessed the apartment until it seemed a whore's room without conversation, alive only with the mechanical noises of a minimum satisfaction.

By the time Hal, wavering like wheat in the floor's center, had begun with large expert gestures from which occasionally a glass would fall, break unnoticed at his feet, to mix drinks: alexanders,

mint juleps, an improvisation we called the Little Joe ("It kills you!")—we broke into speech.

"Gin is vulgar," Hal said. "There is *nothing* more vulgar than gin!"

"You read it in a book," I told him, "a book you'd be afraid to be caught reading. Snobbism!"

But there were suddenly tears in Carrie's eyes, more guessed at than really seen behind the concealing discs of brightness on their wire frames. "The sons-of-bitches," she crooned softly, "the sons-of-bitches! How those old women, pitiable old women, are talking about me. Whispering!" She could not have been drunk really, for she had matched us only one drink for four or five, sadness glinting off her amusement like the light off those opaque lenses, our absurdity and her love anomalous in their common dilemma.

"Sons-of-bitches is masculine," Hal said reproachfully.

"True, but at least it's the correct plural. For that we must be grateful. There are some vulgar louts who say 'son-of-a-bitches.' *That* we frown on." It seemed very important to me.

"That we frown on," Hal echoed, clasping me about the shoulders, and we frowned on it together, friends forever, gallantly in the fading light—

"Life in that school is getting impossible for me." The improbable cigarette, snuffed, dropped from her hand. "I swear I shall—" She searched for the apt word in our dull eyes, rigid in their pretty pink orbits.

"Revolt!" we told her. "Rebel! Throw the bosses off your backs!"

We taught her the words of the "Internationale" and marched for her, rather decorously we thought, though the furniture insidiously attacked us, fluid and unfaithful, across the genteel room, the hump of the world, singing it. "'Tis the final conflict. . . ."

The barricades were up and our warm blood gleamed at us from the rug's softness, from the bottles' secret ambush of color. Oh, they were all proud of us!

And we were proud of each other; we loved each other so; trapped in our singular integrity, we faced without tears the conspiracy of the unjustifiable world.

"Sons-of-bitches," cried noble Carrie.

"'Whatever brute or blackguard made the world,'" quoted gallant Hal.

And I lost myself in a phrase of Baudelaire, the real clue, I knew in that instant, to everything: "*l'insolence de la nature.*" But the tenth time I tried to repeat it, it was suddenly gone; I had forgotten it and the terrible unfairness of it all brought me almost to tears. But they stood by me, my understanders, my comrades—

We had all grown smaller, more distant in the expanding, unstable room; we could see each other only by propping our eyelids open with our fingers, straining, straining. And above us our heads, soft and swollen, bump-bumped the ceiling in a pulse of escape. They were so little, so dearly little, so dear!

All the splendid things we would do, the astounding rapes, the bright revenges, the dazzling explorations of sensibility, the poems, the disorders, the sighs were there, palpable forever between us. "By God!" Hal cried for us all. "By God By God By God!" And the phone rang.

It was my mother; we could hear Carrie softly lying to her in the foyer, and the grayness that had fogged until then only the room's harsh, limiting corners closed in upon our central splendor. "Yes. Yes. They've just left. It should be another fifteen minutes, I suppose. Yes. Good night."

I imagined in her pauses my mother's worried voice, sleep-blurred and querulous, and behind the voice the anguish of her unreal possession (for only melancholy and pride enwombed me now and forever), the obsessive picture of my broken body, fallen from bridges, bruised by trucks, riven by lightning, open to the inner alien lake of blood that she had fed and could drain now only in the inverted wish of fear.

I did not understand then, splashed on the chair's plush, intolerably bloated and weary, the contempt that Carrie must have felt, nor her terrible joy in it, for the failure of real mothers, who give neither the golden present nor release, but exact for warmth,

for animal nourishment and prose comforts our endless indulgence and a ridiculous allegiance to childhood. But Carrie in return endured the indignity of the lie, that absurd complicity with boys.

I felt, whirling toward sleep's center in the homeward taxi (I had not heard Carrie call it—focused for a moment only as the lights snapped up and I gave my address), a nausea at all tenderesses of women; and Hal and I fell apart, cleft down our center of communicating brightness by the dark, by cold and the cab's lurching, hurled each to his window, each at last to his own home.

I moved through the dark rooms from the door to my bed, kicking a chair in muddled resentment, while my mother pretended to sleep, unwilling to offend me further by seeming to have waited up for my return, and my father coughed in his sleep beside her. Meanwhile Hal (I thought dimly, falling, falling) was settled now into the female darkness of his fatherless house, around him the small rustling breaths of his sisters and the smell of urine from the bed of his cancerous mother, fitfully swooning from her long pain; and Carrie (I knew as sleep twitched from me my poisoned body) lay, forgetting Hal's uneasy jerk from under her hand's farewell pressure and the emptiness of the hallway after us, proud of what she possessed, in the blackness, alone.

I have been as drunk since though rarely enough to recall each episode: once at a Christmas party in a shoe store in Philadelphia while the star salesman, a fairy, blushed and squealed, goosed by the night stick of a corner cop, and one of the girls puked over a railing on to the porter who lay, his leg broken, on the basement landing; once at a junior officers' mess on Saipan where the rats would leap at us when we went out to make water at the edge of the boondocks, and Dogherty with whom I had been arguing canon law slipped suddenly from the wavering level of my sight, only his hand frozen on to the bar in a baffled gesture toward the triple whisky he had ordered to beat Closing; once in Shanghai with a couple of Korean girls who played the drums and had no hair on their bodies; and in Ann Arbor the night someone had poured perfume into my drink and I punched two holes in the wall. They were all of them satisfactorily bestial, degrading; and

yet they failed me, they failed what I remembered of that night at Carrie's.

To begin with, one learns to like this drink more, that less; to abide, in part at least, the etiquette of such abandonments. The very throat is conditioned by memories of nausea, and one submits to an imposed pattern of drunkenness; having learned that he is the Surly Drunk, the Maudlin or the Lustful, one imitates, even past the will's collapse, his last time's self, is, hopelessly, the expected clown, the looked-for animal. But there is another dimension—

If one is lucky, he may make once, no more, the pure Adamic fall; know the headlong tug of that unspeakable gravity of which our earth's pull is the mere metaphor and the endless falling of dreams a hint only: the abominable beauty of assent to evil and the obverse of terror and contrition, what I chose to call then a hangover, and what was, after a little, just that. For in time, we are too atomized, too harried, too distract even to sin purely; demons no longer tempt or torment us, but leave us contemptuously to habit's turgid allure, the dull reproach of our viscera.

And we haunt mechanically the unretrievable revelation, to know again good and evil, to be assured that we shall surely die—but are merely drunk, laid, hated or hanged. The boys' orgy at Carrie's was for me, though it is only now that I know it clearly, such a vision; and the war, strangely familiar, verified its intuitions; that the face of the comrade blurred to the assassin, the face of the assassin to my own could not surprise me, and I woke from the war as one wakes from the familiar, dank bed of his drunkenness.

But not yet—not until I had left San Francisco, its rock angled upward from the tenderly possessed waters of the bay, acute almost to hysteria under asphalt and past the elegant bars, the untidy bohemias with a view; not until the train had made the noise of its passage among the unnoticed, nighttime mountains, while we threw from the doors our empty bottles, imagining their long pointless arc into the black, and the rabbit's small leap of fear at their splintering; not until we had swarmed, sung and sweated

the train's innards into a world for our four days' waking and sleeping.

We ate seldom, for the lines in the diners were too long and we were done with waiting; but we drank when we could, timing the M.P.s' passing or huddled in washrooms, without love or good humor. At the longer stops, we would race to buy liquor up the melancholy alleys that reached vaguely toward the heart of an unrecognized city, the anonymous lanes of violated snow between warehouses and all-night restaurants; or sometimes we would dose ourselves with the acrid coffee of station lunch-counters, endlessly mopped by the gray rag of the waitress fighting sleep under the hegemony of the huge visible clock, sober up enough to redeem the sense of becoming drunk.

We shared the air, the toilets, the thin trickle of water from the wall spigots, those delights of children whose asses we patted as they went by us with their precarious paper cups, back and forth to the bored mother smelling of their excrement. There was not enough of anything, only of time too much, but I at least was not bored. (An old man, clean and nervous, sat opposite me for a while between two jerkwater stations, tearing a Crackerjack box to pieces, mathematically, doggedly, in his scrubbed fingers; when he caught me watching him, he shrugged and said, "What the hell else is there to do," but he thought I was kidding him when I answered, "Have a drink.")

There was always a card game to sit in on, and after nightfall somewhere a group singing.

Some of us would sing for a while our own songs, the ballads of our recent exile and parochial contempt:

So it's bless, bless, bless, bless them all
As over the fantail we fall . . .

but it would not work, the ironies badly sung seemed only obvious, and it was as if no one had ever really gone over the fantail to the unimaginable gullets of sharks. Only the Swanee River mattered, that long, long trail and the little brown church in the wildwood.

Oh come, come, come, come!
Come, come, come, come!
Come to the church in the wildwood . . .

How mean our common culture is: these few songs, some verses learned before the eighth grade, the faces on picture-cards and the tops of Dixie Cups, the slogans on cereal boxes—no more, except the debased comradeship of shared trite viciousness. All else we are or know divides us, and sensing it whenever the music lapsed, we would turn from each other in terror after the last chorus, as the meaningless racket of the wheels recurred, filling the interstices between our alien heads.

At night the card games adjourned to the men's toilets; the soiled mothers, the grandparents with their thumb-marked snapshots, the workers moving to new cities faded from us like the obtrusive detail of landscape from the frames of the windows. We inherited the train, homecomers, strangers from battles with names and nameless islands, our discharges folded in our pockets. Only the aisles, defined by the inhuman smell of the green baize curtains, linked our car-end brightnesses; the weary porters dozed beside us, and the occasional sleeper, aroused for pissing, blinked in dazed hostility, knew he was in another country.

Very late, after the whisky was gone and the last bottle broken, we would fumble along the cramped swaying corridors toward sleep, and the whores would be after us, stretching between curtains their restraining hands from upper berth and lower. "Come on in, honey!" "Up here, dearie!" "Oh, stay away from her, she's no good!" "Try *me*, honey!"—louder and louder until the M.P.s were all around us, nudging us on, "For God's sake, hit the sack, we gotta sleep too," and inspecting the girls' bunks just to be sure. And the whores would scream after them, "What is this, a *jail*? Son-of-a-bitches!"

In the morning, we would wake from the begrimed few hours of sleep, flush down the drain our last night's joy and regard briefly, among the suspenders, the toothbrushes, the litter of crushed paper cups, our lathered images that rocked from sight and the razor to the gut-bucket rhythm of our onwardness.

In a matter of two days we achieved customs, almost a profane morning ritual. "How'd you do last night, Sam?" we would yell to the porter who was tucking away with agile trembling arms our linen, "Get in, Sam?" and he would make the invariable response: "I feel like the wrath of God. I feel like the wrath of God." Just at that point, the large reddish Marine who slept above me would leap to the floor with a thwack of his bare feet. "Glad my mother didn't have no daughter," he'd say and wait, blinking in his green skivvy shirt, for some stooge to ask him why. "'Cause she'd be a whore!" and he'd wallop his thigh with such animal, innocent astonishment at his own wit, that we could never forbear laughing, our day's first laughter, without geniality but short of malice.

As the last day of our trip darkened, I had an intolerable urge to talk; for four days I had scarcely said more than, "That beats, take the money!" or "Skip the water in mine this time," the undangerous predication of one who belonged, and I was tired of my disguise, ashamed of the cowardice that prompted it.

"So, I've proved something," I said to the Wac in the seat beside me.

"That's great, mac," she said, figuring, I suppose, another drunk. She looked no better than I did after the long haul, her hair limp, the pores in her face distinct and dirt-clogged, beginning to break out. I had a sense of what an artificial and inconclusive victory is our customary individuation of faces, how much a function of soap and barbers; a spell of fatigue and poor washing in a common environment and we resemble each other dully like peasants, regress to the shared specific face.

"Or maybe I haven't. I mingle unnoticed with the multitude. No false whiskers, no putty on the nose. It's the disguise of anonymity. Like the postman in— Do you read detective stories?"

"I've read them."

"But there was one private eye who had me spotted all the time. He wrote the scoop on a postcard and mailed it at Atlantic City, along with a box of saltwater taffy, to himself. But just wait till he gets hungry again, he'll know all! Know what his name is?"

"Whose name?" She didn't seem very interested, was writing

her own name with the gray tip of her fingernail in the dust on the windowsill.

"Kitty's a nice name," I said.

"It sure makes this a happy day for me that you like it. Whose name?"

"Ah, you follow me. The detective's name, of course, the shamus who knows. It's not Hercule Poirot, not Peter Wimsey or — But let me be brief. It's me, *me!* That surprises you; you start with amazement, turn pale; you're breathing hard—"

"Yappity-yap-yap-yap," and her plump dirty fingers made the sign that goes with it.

"Sorry."

"Whyn't you buy us a drink?"

"A great idea," I said, "I need one!"

"Like I need to go back to Yonkers." She was a card, you see, one of those plump girls, besides, with a body that seems not built by food, but rather the function of simple sexual selfishness, a kind of monument of accumulated animal experiences made flesh.

We went to the parlor car and had a drink, then another; I found her eyes curiously unpleasant. "You never knew Hal, at least!" I was still capable of feeling that it was an abrupt opening, but it seemed a point worth making somehow.

"What Hal?"

"Any of them. Me, for instance—"

"Knock it off! Your name's not Hal."

I agreed; it was not a question on which I was prepared to take a firm stand. We were moving through that part of Pennsylvania where the obvious flowering of fire from the blast furnaces is anyone's spectacle, and Kitty's face turned toward it, from me to the orange lambency and the high, dark air in which it was lost.

"I had a theory once that Hal had sold himself to the Devil. Wrote a story about it, a sort of a Faust story. It made sense, of a kind. Given the transaction, at least the cancer was not, you know, idiotic, but Hell's taking up of its options—"

"Oh, are you a Catholic?" She fingered the chain about her neck, the links dipping toward the hidden cross, uneasy symbol for me; when I was a kid, I used to dream of having a woman,

naked except for that sign between her breasts—all pogroms revenged!

"I don't know."

It must have seemed a sappy answer to her, but she was still staying; she looked hopefully at her empty glass, and, in answer, I rolled mine off on to the floor where it didn't even break on the soft carpeting.

"Now, it seems to me to have been chiefly a question of value, of the confusion of value and price. When Carrie proved to Hal so neatly that money could buy the things he really wanted; I don't mean merely Things, but real satisfactions in the outward shapes of Things: books and music and drunkenness—that mean pathetic ancient bitch" (The eyes of the girl flickered and slipped from focus; she was drunk too and I had not realized it; the dark sheathed us both in its indifference) "who had everything less than Hal, except—money, how could he keep from believing that the measure of all he might do, of all anyone did ever was that, and that, the only undeniable reward, the redemption of the outsider. Money. But the joke was" (I leaned toward her oily lost face for the last confidence, the cream of the jest) "we thought we were Communists. Communists! Revolt! Rebel! Throw the bosses off your backs!"

I was yelling at the end, and it had become clear to Kitty that there were no more drinks in it for her; she heaved herself from the seat, that fat flesh quivering a little. "Shit on you, Karl Marx!" she said, and left me there to the laughter, the train's racket, the dark, and closing in on us now, closer, closer, the threat of homecoming.

III

I came up into New York as into daylight and I had not expected it. It was as if, after the long noise of the plane's coming, its guns' inauspicious patter, and at last the bomb's brief screaming —there was the explosion; yonder; seen and not for us; off our beam the bright flowering; a spectacle merely and not what we had dreamed of and waked to the engines' usual trembling, and

dreamed again and waked, saying, "Not yet, not really, not this time."

I was, to begin with, sober; for sleep had sapped me unawares at the trip's ending and I awoke after arrival, under the porter's hand, spared all false farewells, to a pleasant haze of collecting my gear, checking it, being separated. Coming from such utter sleep to another initiation, my last Navy pay in my pocket and the cheerful, unreal literature of the Separation Center, I felt a child with the bribe of ice cream in a world of well-intentioned adult liars; all deceit, I almost cried, is a function of love!

The day, after the languors of the train, was so full of quick detail, endless wherever one entered. Besides, there was sunlight on the city, a diffuse and hearty whiteness that the streets bore well, with a dirty nobility I had not foreseen. Given the noise of the wedding, the sentimental cries of relatives, the conspiracy of lights, the veil on the sluttish bride seems not an irony, but, well, sufficient!

Briefly the image of my wife, I confess it, interpolated itself among the stone faces of buildings, but briefly only; I denied it, for I knew where I must first go, the willed What among all given, unchosen ends to which I must return.

I was going to see Carrie. Dan, Kitty, the sea, the protests of whores and the failures of enemy fire (List the influences on the Romantic Movement. Comment on one. Where does the will begin?) had prompted me through ten thousand miles and the recurring ambiguities of choice, but chiefly, I suppose, I had been driven by memories of my complicity, the guilt of having abetted Carrie's fantasies, without madness, out of something more cowardice than pity.

I had last seen Carrie just before leaving the States, having been able to find no way to avoid the meeting; for I had turned up in New York with a month of leisure before departure in the guise of an additional training course (we learned the names of obscure islands, did push-ups on a windy roof and adjourned to the bars and theaters) and Carrie knew it.

"Carrie wants you to come see her." "Carrie would like to see you. She's read your poem about Hal's death." Friends and half-

friends, moved by versions of tenderness or vicarious curiosity, would return from their intrusions into the rooms where she abode her loneliness to badger me. "Why don't you drop in and see Carrie. She lives right down in the Village now."

That much I knew; I had even been to visit her once with Hal after her improbable transplanting. She had moved there from the suburban apartment of my first drunkenness when she resigned her job to become, in one of those extraordinary total commitments of women, completely what was of use to Hal. I used to try to imagine her sometimes in that anomalous setting, bending her worn blandness to the new orthodoxies of the *Nation*, enduring whatever chic camouflage of her love Hal might demand.

She had not given up the flat, even to make her hopeless adventure in California; and when she had flown back to New York with Hal, already full of his death though ignorant of it, to become, he thought, assistant to that radio writer he had always admired, it was ready. And she closed her life in upon its darkened center after he, not believing it and in much pain, had died.

I did not want to go. What love Hal and I had shared, what redeemed for us our disparity, had dwindled from meeting to meeting, from letter to letter. The goat-cry he had liked to fancy swelling to his lips in New York or Chicago still swelled, he wrote, and it did not surprise me, in Ann Arbor and in Cambridge (for a moment his upward career had been in danger when he flunked the Harvard entrance exams, but he had got there finally, Carrie's check in hand, via two years at Michigan, moving onward past the block to his breathless, absurd ending); and from France or Germany, where he bicycled summers, the essential news was the same: the boy's loneliness, the goat's anguish, the dog's despair.

At first he would share with me the circumstantial data of his predicaments, whatever, susceptible to contempt or political sentimentality, was within the range of his sensibility: the fraternity boys singing their outrageous loyalties as he washed their dishes (at Ann Arbor he played the role, larger than life, of the working student, and though later he came more and more to depend on Carrie's generosity, the attitudes and assurances of that time persisted, permitted him to feel the Proletarian even in Eliot House);

the Party-line professor of classics ("A real all-around man! I met his mistress in New York") voting belatedly death to the Fascist Socrates; the girl he had most lately kissed ("Eighteen years old and she kept her mouth closed. Closed, by God!") who left him for an ROTC officer: all that would permit inexpensive cynicism or the profanation of accepted values.

We began by revenging on the ordered world its exclusion of ourselves, but we came to love the revenge for its own sake; what exposed, demeaned, desecrated we needed as evidence for what we had guessed by its rejection of us, the world's unworthiness. We chose not to belong, though they would not believe us, we *chose* it! We did not wear the Phi Beta Kappa keys we had won though we mentioned them always, jeering.

What enthusiasms crept, despite our wariness, into our letters, we would mutually belabor with elementary irony in the style we were currently reading, in schoolboy French, or in our mother tongue, the abusive endearments that never palled: "You god-damn self-torturing, Jesuitical fart, Hail!"

It was I, I am afraid, who betrayed our common cause. In the first place, I married Vivian ("I take it," Hal wrote, for it was to him the only plausible motive, "the wench is with child!"), and then there was my Ph.D., an article in *PMLA*, a job teaching to Freshmen the discriminations of logic and commas.

Moreover, I could not abide the disjunction of what I lived and believed, the minimum disaffection of cynicism; could not, like Hal, continue the strategy of pretending to despise my accommodations and retreats. Toward what was pious and bourgeois I moved, perhaps with something of hysteria ("the last neurotic hunger," was Hal's exegesis, "for normality"), yet singly, at least, and I came to terms, blushing and glancing over my shoulder, with platitudes and gentleness. Behind there was Hal fixed in my abandoned attitudes, a waxworks of reproach and boyhood; and what in that wax head I might address I could not really imagine.

Of Vivian, in particular, I could tell him nothing ("Vivian sends her regards" and in return, "Give my regards to your wife." He would never trouble to remember her name), how we had

discovered quietnesses in ourselves that we had not known we were imploring and were content, and how where desire failed we did not. No one, I suppose, has ever been so startled at the simple chastity of marriage, and if the motions we made in its honor were to the outsider's eye stuffness and selfish withdrawal, that was the eye's error and not the meaning of the dance. (I do not mean to tell you, where I am saying so much, that our marriage was all blitheness without blemish; the collapse of ourselves would startle us sometimes into mutual assault, or the obdurate heart suspect the gimmick of peace, try sullenness. But that could be to Hal all the less confessed.)

So Hal and I abandoned presentness, fell back upon the pitiful lien of recollection, piously naming the situations in which we had once, or thought so, achieved oneness. What we both knew we confided over and over, what we could not evoke we named; no ghosts came to us but we stubbornly haunted our unreal pastness. The true pasts with which we were still continuous we mutually ignored; they had lived underground, under our friendship, and only now, after the fact, we discovered what we had been meaning and had not known how to suspect.

We cried each to himself "deceived" and "deceiver" to the other. Only where we hurt we knew that we had touched one another, and we stuttered incredulously, bitterly toward alienation.

Toward the end, after a year of silence which had to do for the tentatively composed avowals of hostility that we never quite sent, I had a note from Hal asking for a street map of Ann Arbor where he had been at school, and where I had met my wife, married and was then living. "I'm doing a story. . . ." His offhand tone, not amiable but assuming amiability, denied the motives of my embarrassment. Unwittingly or not the request mocked me, and though I resolved to send the map, I kept forgetting it and forgetting it, until I had, with some relief, lost his address.

On his very last communication to me, Hal had scrawled only his name; it was the program for a production of *Waiting for Lefty* put on in some seedy Boston hall by a group of fellow-traveling Harvard students, all conspiratorially listed under obvious pseudonyms: George Spelvin, Homer Stoopnagle—but Hal, who had

a small part ("Why that son-of-a-bitch is my own lousy brother!"), had, with spectacular arrogance, used *my name*.

There was a not quite accountable shudder in seeing that familiar constellation of letters (spelled correctly, too, in added insult) on the alien sheet. In what precise sense Hal understood the joke I had no way of knowing; what in it was insolence, what a claim, what the inversion of love I did not then concern myself with sorting out. Chiefly, I resented what I felt as the offensive camaraderie of the blackmailer, exacting something: tenderness or embarrassment, identification or begrimed affability, for a dated and unprofitable complicity.

I suffered from an excess of pride that was especially vulnerable, secure in having made a real escape from the implications of our adolescence, sure of having discovered motives outside the flight from innocence, or that fear of allegiance which protects the outsider from rebuffs and love. This pride I called humility.

"Comrade, Comrade," I would have told Hal, "I no longer share your lonely country. Bus drivers greet me, knowing my stop; I buy wood for my fireplace, and I practice before my mirror the harmless face of the bourgeois." But I could not reach him, and I touched Vivian instead, who was beside me, fingering her shoulder, her pale red hair, the real evidence of belonging and peace.

"Hal?" she asked, looking at the envelope in my hand, at me troubled. She used the names of people she knew only from my memories with a familiarity I found charming and that was to her somehow an assurance.

"Yes—Hal. If that joker was a ghost he would haunt me."

"No danger," she said, "he seems very much alive."

"He'll never die. It would be out of character."

I believed that then, in a way, as much as I had ever believed anything, and when, astonishingly, Hal lay dying at the age of twenty-three, I wrote him once more out of the bewilderment that canceled all my attitudes, long unused anyhow and grown almost unfamiliar. I could scarcely recall his face, certainly not evoke it revised by death's imminence. He had returned to boyhood to die, and only I was absent, far-off, not writing and harried.

It was a difficult time for me. For three years I had been writing

poetry, finding in marriage a warmth and illumination eager to be words, a break in the inhibiting coldness that had preceded it; but I had suddenly, inexplicably dried up and I was scared.

It was one of those times when one feels with a deep, quiet certainty that he will never be able to write again. I read detective stories frantically, suffered from piles and athlete's foot, discovered that my hair was growing thin, and, rereading my three years' body of work, found it a few cries toward an impossible conversion, no more.

There was the abortion, too—or perhaps it was all essentially that. In my resolve to have no children, the whole residue of fear that had survived my induction into responsibility monstrously prospered. To be sure, I told myself, there are juvenile decisions that are resistance merely, against which our current stutters, is heat: to cry against marriage and marry, to damn the community and surrender to it is normal; one even learns to play bridge; but this last, delicate scruple cannot be abandoned for all that is baffled when body and body are sundered always by the intervention of some discreet machine.

We scarcely felt the bafflement for a while, being yet each other's explorers, crying to each other from pinnacle or declivity what vistas we had discovered or what darknesses. But the real end of such coupling is not knowledge only, and afterwards it irked us: the month's end niggling worry, the delays of preparation, the dull constant peril (we defined it so) at the core of joy.

"Oh, God damn it," I cried when we were, despite all, in the usual terrible phrase, "caught." "Oh, God damn it!"

"It wouldn't be so horrible a thing after all to have a child." Vivian smiled ambiguously out of a face lumpy, green eyes marred with the drug we had been vainly trying. "My ears ring. My mouth's sour. I'm tired! tired! and I shall never put one of those uglinesses between my teeth again. I can't. I can't."

"I swear you really *want* the brat," I cried, exasperated, and full of a pity with which I could not come to terms, but let break from me in rage. "You've wished this on us."

"What if I have? What then?" She sat down, lurching a little, as one surrendering, undoing her words.

"Oh Lord, don't cry, don't cry," I railed at the tears of weakness that brimmed and broke, brimmed and broke past letting (I thought incongruously of a stopped toilet bowl, the greasy inevitable rise and overflow of slow water) at her eyes' margins. "I hate tears. I hate women who exploit them."

"And I hate you!" she wailed, grabbing me, kissing me, kissing me, until I tasted the taste of her mouth, the drug's taste inhabiting her. We trembled together as if what scared us were not ourselves, but we were rather its solution, and crouched, I could feel the articulation of her pelvis, bone against my bone, imagine the monster that would swell her presently, innocent in its bloody caul.

I could not tell her my vision: the slow terror of being a child, and the inevitable fall to hair, to awkwardness, to evil from that imbecile partial grace; how I could not will that indignity for any not myself. I talked, instead, of money, of our unstable life, of all the weak, customary lies against parenthood. And I ended by smashing a chair against the floor, splintering the legs, strewing about us a pattern of sawdust; and I cried out that I wished I were dead but I did not wish it and the ebb of my anger was fear, and I said in my aching head, "I did not mean it!" and aloud to my wife, "Have it, damn it all, let's have the thing. God save the child!"

Next day she aborted, and for forty-eight hours I could not touch her, remote on the sour bed where she composed and recomposed the meaning of her hair against the pillow. I watched her faintly granulated eyelids flicker over the pupil's paleness and I thought I did not like her, weak and mourning a meaningless puddle of blood. But when she reached toward me, in a known fragile gesture, her hand, I knew it was I that she mourned and I said, "Dear, dear," kissing the rise of that breast no kid had tugged, and I suffered the tender insult of her pity.

So I was assailed on one side and on the other, by the threat of birth, by the threat of death, and they debouched both in death's actuality, though I did not yet believe that Hal would really die for all the whispers of cancer, and I would not confess that that Thing, our Thing, that blob, ginder, scarcely organized

excrement, lost like a nosebleed, flushed with a wrist's flick from being, could be said to have died.

Before that time, I had felt death only as a threat to myself, *my* defining predicament, and though in that alone there was pain enough to make me cry out from my pillow or wince secretly in the day's brightness, there was the ready metaphysical solace: for death seen thus was its own defeat, would die with me. Beyond there were only notions of hell to which I was not prepared to subscribe.

All who had meaning for me were living still, and so there had been no decisive test for the ancestral taboo I exploited, the privilege of the Jewish priestly line never to look upon the dead, inscribed in the unread Law as a command, but for me a refuge, a device of profane grace. I had seen an old man once plunge with a lost gray face downward toward the ice, an arm's length before me, and when I heard the mutter about him, "Dead!" I had changed my direction, walked swiftly away, my eyes fixed on the motion of my own living feet.

The bogus piety of the act, its fastidious selfishness distressed me, but it protected me as well (and this at some level I knew was worth great expense of spirit) from reconsidering the problem of birth and fatherhood, from reading the other side of terror, its obverse of responsibility. It was a sort of virginity I chose, a connoisseur's virginity, unnoticed by the laity.

And yet when I heard that Hal was dying I wrote to him, but he was dead before my word reached him, leaving me with an unreasonable sense of having been rebuffed, a feeling of guilt and incompleteness—even a little anger.

"I never even saw your letter. I can't imagine what became of it," Carrie told us. We had gone at last to her apartment, Vivian and I (Vivian I brought along thinking that she might inhibit to some degree excesses of intimacy, displace any easy identification of Hal and me on Carrie's part), hoping until the last committal click of the opening door that Carrie would not be at home. "I saw little of his—or him toward the end." She sat with her hands neatly fallen into her lap, will-less, patterned, as she had been since rising briefly to let us in, and would chiefly remain until

we left. She seemed to glow faintly in the unnecessarily darkened room. "Very little."

"I feel baffled," I said, "baffled, as if I had stretched out a hand and there was no one there. No—I mean more; as if there were no place for one to be, so that one felt beyond disappointment, shame at an unjustifiable miscalculation. If he had simply *chosen* not to answer, it would have been something meaningful at least, a snub, a—"

"He would have answered you, of course."

"Well, surely, but I meant—" It didn't seem worth bothering with what I might have meant; I was afraid that I had offended Carrie, let my voice's lapse serve as a retraction. I could hear Vivian's chair creaking a little; uneasily, I thought. I did not look at her.

"He withdrew—I think really *they* drew him away from me at the end, his family, and at the very—just before—you know, he was almost a baby, clung like a very little child to his mother, those sisters."

"You don't mean to say that his mother is alive, by God. I'd always thought that she had cancer, was at the point every minute of—"

"She had no cancer—only the fear of it. But he, without fear—" She stopped for a while short of the sob I had been expecting. "You know his sister, the oldest one?"

"Rose?"

"Yes. She's, well, she's nothing but a—"

"Whore," I suggested and the word boomed between us, revealing to me how hushed until then had been our voices, though I had felt the whole subdued tone of our encounter as a function of the muted light. There was a provoking hesitancy in Carrie's speech; so many things seemed impossible for her to say: not only the grossnesses she had learned once for Hal's sake to tolerate and the blunt name of death, but the names of Hal's sisters, his own name. For him the simple pronoun, quite without special inflection, sufficed; he was to her ideally the third person singular masculine and for the others about him she had resolved to make

do with the grammatical gamut: "I" for herself, "you" for me, "they" for his family.

"He was living with her, that—you know, in Hollywood and I had to fly out to save him. He could do no work, save no money. A mess of bottles, you know, and dirty dishes. And then she left him, went off with some—"

"He was very unhappy in Hollywood, I was told."

"They didn't understand him. I cooked for him, cleaned and he wrote a little on his own—a prophetic story I'll show you later. But here, afterwards, in the hospital, I could scarcely see him. And he held pitifully (they must have scared him) his mother's arm the whole time." She alluded to that gesture with subdued horror, a scarcely mentionable apostasy. "He kept talking about Zionism, the Jews, endlessly the Jews, whatever would divide us—"

"Did he know what was wrong with him?"

"No. I think not. Certainly not at first, even when he was being treated. It started in the throat, you know. We told him it was a fungus infection."

"He must have had a terrible will to be deceived. It sounds so phony."

"Perhaps, but with a doctor saying it—technical jargon. Then it spread to his—" she faltered, indicating her genital region with a slack gesture, and said it after all, "his testicles, and then his brain—"

I thought of the allegorical, the almost theatrical progress of the disease, from seat to seat of his special falls: the sin of rhetoric, the sin of lust, the sin of fear— Oh, Hal! But I said nothing.

"It was so fast— And he was so delighted with the job that was waiting for him. In the young it is always fast, and he was very young." She made a scarcely perceptible motion of despair, at the impossibility, I guessed, of our grasping just how young. Her eyes touched Vivian and stayed there, really noticing her for the first time. "You're very young, too. He said so often that he would have liked to see you, to see the 'unlucky girl.'" She smiled dimly, at the reminiscent savor of the poor joke, as well as to remove its offense. "You didn't know him?"

"Not really; but we've talked of him so often, I *feel* as if I'd known him; and his name has always seemed somehow familiar—" Vivian's voice seemed alien in that room, her words essentially false in that context, and I was pleased that it was so, proud of her remoteness from our predicament, knowing that if I alone came forth from that room to blitheness, it would be by her good grace, by virtue of her immunity.

"This is he, and this, and this." Carrie indicated with her eyes the walls from whose dimness now sprang a score of Hals, fixed in the grimace of graduation, wet on the breathless beach, alone or between unknown faces. We were in a Hal museum; in the hung pictures, the sweater (unnoticed till then) flung as if in passing on a chair, the fingered books, the incomplete manuscript on a table, he persisted. One sensed that Carrie moved so little about the flat to leave inviolate the cushion his weight had crushed, the imperceptible print of his step on the carpet's nap. "He is here," she said. "I have him."

"There is a real sense of him in this room." It was not so—only a hysteria of reminiscence, a thin willful obsession, lived within those walls, but I, shameless, played up to her last self-deceit.

"Yes," she said, "yes," and I should have marked her outrageous excitement, been wary.

"I have felt him even in places less his than this, a kind of presence, a pressure."

"Yes," she said, "yes."

"That was why I wrote that poem, not willing it, almost under compulsion." That was true in a way, and I resented Vivian's reproachful stir beside me.

"Oh yes, yes. I knew you understood. And he is different now and happy." She felt safe; she could confess it at last, the whole intolerable secret; her breath scarcely moved her. "He comes back; he comes here. He has talked to me and he is through with insolence, with (how did you say it in the poem?) 'all imposition of the will.'"

I writhed for my poor metaphor, the accomplice unredeemably now of her self-haunting. "I merely meant a trope, a figure—"

"Yes, he comes; he talks to me." Her eyes moved toward the bedroom, indicating ineffable intimacies. "You *must* know; you've said it so truly. He told me he liked your poem—'beyond the fear of innocence,' so apt, so musical."

"Not *really* a ghost," I tried hopelessly.

"No. No, ghost is a dreadful word. What comes is more than that, no coldness. And I have him." She watched in the consequent silence my embarrassment, and I her precarious triumph, and Vivian our joint failure, and we could say nothing more.

I lied my way out at last, pleading an engagement, edging toward the door as Carrie pressed upon me the little magazine with Hal's "prophetic" story (I read it later, the prevision of death compromised by a prose whose falsity no coincidence of fact could redeem), one of the books Hal had owned ("Take one—any one. He wants you to have it.") I chose a copy of Yeats's poems that seemed scarcely read, marked only with his penciled name), a last look at the pictures; at the very threshold she touched my shoulder, tentatively, as if she were not sure that we inhabited the same dimension. Standing, she seemed not thin exactly but somehow weightless. "You have no—" she hesitated intolerably, searching for the precise nuance of gentleness—"children?"

"No. Not yet." It had been six months since the miscarriage, but I winced a little, offered the lying implication of the "not yet" in apology, and Vivian, sensing it, pressed my hand in secret solidarity.

"It would have been— Hal would so have liked it, if— A son of yours, you know, would have seemed—" We stood there about our mutual discomfort, Carrie incapable of leaving off, we unable to depart until she had.

And then, quite suddenly, Vivian and I were in the unmitigated glare of the street, trying to guess in the outer wall of the house Carrie's window, but we were hopelessly turned around.

When we hailed a cab, the driver looked us over disconsolately. "Not Brooklyn," he said, "any place but Brooklyn. I always get lost there and wind up in a cemetery, and cemeteries make me melancholy." We laughed all the way uptown in the rear seat,

while the cabbie examined us furtively in his mirror, wondering, I suppose, why the hell we looked like that if we didn't live in Brooklyn.

Back in our hotel room, I kicked off my shoes, stretched out on the bed, regarding through the defining cube of space on whose floor I lay the otherness of the ceiling. Twenty-eight times I had waked to that ceiling, to the too-squareness of the room, the nudity of the walls (we had taken down the hotel pictures the first day, improbable flowers obscenely pink, stacked them in the rear of the closet), the unconquerable impersonal odor that denied the permanence of our tenure.

"Not a noble adventure, I'm afraid," I said to Vivian who stood at the window, twisting a ruffled edge of curtain idly in one hand, her face turned toward the noise of traffic.

"Definitely not."

"Ghosts, ghosts," I sighed.

"Oh, you played up to her shamelessly!"

"Sure I played up to her, poor, cracked thing. What else does she have? You probably ran around giving the other kids the scoop on Santa Claus at the age of three. Don't be so damned sure about ghosts anyhow. There are more things—"

"Oh, please. Please!"

Twenty-eight mornings I had waked in that room to the racket of the streetcars and the delicate belching of the city pigeons, Vivian beside me; tomorrow would be the same, the pigeons, the trolleys, the uncongenial smell; only lastness would have been added, scarcely marked in the bustle of packing, but redeeming yet one more triteness to meaning. The day after that I would be gone, shipped out.

And suddenly desire, like an unforeseeable pain, the unwilling recall of a lapsed anxiety, assailed me. Aware dimly of how the secret history of passion proceeds with paranoiac disregard of our words, our daylight motives, I rose to touch Vivian (the hushed fall of my stockinginged feet gave me a sense of moving from ambush): the discreet resilience of her buttocks, the notched, resisting shoulders, the plump half-arc of breast seen under the arm

raised to the curtain; to reassure my hands' extravagant pulsing, to confirm what cued my crouched rigidity.

She swayed ambiguously from uprightness—and I pulled her with me to the bed, thinking that before the final warmth and weariness I wanted to hear the tearing of silk. But when I kissed her I could taste nothing, and I let her roll from me, her unexpected not-thereness, and we lay side by side not touching, identical, our fists balled tight and our chins tilted to the darkness that moved now upon our room from the unseen city.

My awareness of my body had faded, faded almost to nothing, a fingernail barely touching some leaden surface, the vague sense of distant water, sagging between banks with that intolerable heaviness just before freezing. To feel more would be nausea, and yet I dared it.

"For Christ's sake," I said. "For Christ's sake. What is it?"

"I want to talk to you."

"She wants to talk to me! Talk! Just a minute until I tuck my tail between my legs. There are ladies present. Shall we begin our conversation now, or would you rather wait for tea?"

"Don't be a clown, please!"

"What shall we talk about: books, movies, the degeneracy of cities, the Negro problem, the—"

"Please, *please!*"

I sat up and banged my fist hard into a pillow: *one*, two, three, *one*, two, three, but it didn't help. "Well?"

"It's ridiculous to try to talk to you now. You've been frustrated for once and you've just lost control of yourself completely. Why must you be so—adolescent!"

There was some truth in it, of course; I ached with what had surged in me and been baffled, despised but could not let my animal resentment. But more, my failure to come to terms with Hal's death, my absurd complicity in Carrie's delusions, my muddled defeat over our almost-child, my cumulative, petty guilts harassed me. And over all, the next day's fear of loneliness and exile and ennui, impossible adequately to confess or exorcise (one would simply have had to cry, and that relief is perversely forbidden to men among us), was busy with its haunting. There

should have been dignity, some calm at least at the heart of departure to redeem it for memory.

"Oh, foul," I cried, "unfair!" at the ineluctable untidiness of it all.

And saying, "I'm sorry," Vivian rose, walked over to pluck again the curtain's edge.

I got up and stood beside her, letting the intermittent light of the electric signs below splash my face, like hers, with another violence, noiseless and indifferent.

"I knew him," she said at last.

"Knew who?"

"Knew Hal. Odd that I'd forgotten."

"Knew Hal where? What are you trying to say?"

"I remember now, remembered when I saw those pictures on Carrie's wall. It was at a picnic once in Ann Arbor. He sat beside me. There was a fire, and I think—I don't really recall—he kissed me."

They would fall together now, I knew (and the knowing of it was a vertigo I had dreamed many times before, surely), my two lives: Hal's world and Vivian's, the denial of innocence and its affirmation, the boy's fall and the man's grace. It had been a sentimental lie, their disjunction, for I had persisted, and I, inescapably my beginning, impugned my end. Unless there was another prayer not yet payable. . . .

I had imposed upon Vivian, scanting for its sake her real humanity, a role more than human, making her the sign of another dispensation, anti-Hal, a profane salvation. The trivial coincidence of circumstance now revealed was no matter; it showed what I should have known without the exemplum of fact, without so vulgar an epiphany, what was true always: that we inhabit, all of us, the continuous kingdom of evil. But that which should have confirmed and enriched my love for her prompted me to revenge my merited distress on Vivian. I prepared now my utter indignity. "Oh, you *think*, you don't really recall if he kissed you!"

"You're not offended. I saw him only that once. It was, you know, nothing—more springtime than anything, hardly personal."

"Hardly personal!" I felt shamed taking up her words compul-

sively with that simple-minded reflex of irony, but I scarcely knew what else to say; there was no way, after all, of justifying for her the sick anger that possessed me. "Perhaps you don't 'really recall' that he took you behind the bushes, hauled down your 'hardly personal' pants and—"

"If you must be disgusting, at least keep your voice down." I had begun to shout a little, and beyond the thin walls that flanked us, we could hear the listeners stirring, old lonely faces, settling now for their evening's excitement.

"Well, did he?"

"Did who what?"

"Did that joker lay you?" When I said it, my voice caught in the distorting whisper, nausea took me, and wrenched apart in the sick spasm, I saw myself, lost, the self-lacerating performer. "Fool," I cried, "weep. Ask forgiveness!" But I would not listen.

"Did he? Did he?" She did not, of course, answer. "Oh, sweet sorrow of parting, those last, lovely, chaste embraces—"

Vivian was trembling; it would have been easy for her to cry, but she preferred anger, would not abandon me even here. "I can't answer such questions. I can't even dignify them by hearing them. It would shame you!"

"Oh, crap! That you forgot him, so completely, unbelievably forgot the whole thing: that's evidence enough!"

"I suppose it was in part willful. You're so odd about such things. But the boy I knew was so different from the myth you've always talked about. Even now it's hard for me to think of him as the same. He was just a boy—good-looking—"

"Good-looking!" I welcomed the trivial, offensive word. "Good-looking. That's your excuse. Justifies all. Explains all. He was 'cute,' too, no doubt. How did you ever miss that word? Would you go so far, Madame Roundheels, as to say that he was 'cute'?"

"You're impossible, *impossible*," she said, crying at last, too late. "All this disgustingness because for a minute I frustrated you—you spoiled brat!"

"God damn it, discuss the subject."

"This is the subject. The rest is camouflage and nastiness. Spoiled brat. Didn't get what he wanted."

"Stick to the point, for Christ's sake, the point!"

"You're shouting."

"Sure I'm shouting and it never gave me so much pleasure."

"Scream and kick the floor, spoiled brat!"

One can never get quite so lost in the voluptuousness of abuse, the abdication of reason and the surrender to childhood, that he does not see somewhere, minuscule, unblinkable, the absurd shame and waste of his predicament; but he cannot stop.

"Stop it!" I cried. "Please stop it! Repeat that damned name once more and I swear I shall hit you." It was all clear then and unredeemable. She would say those two words, deliberately and with knowledge, as she had to, and my hand would fall without rage or guilt. I had told her.

"Oh, good," she cried, "noblest of animals, the poet as wife-beater. Spoiled brat, spoiled brat."

I punched her in the mouth hard, and she hit the floor before she believed it; a little blood showed between her teeth and she was still saying "Spoiled brat," stupidly. Then a deep sobbing took her, jerking her body that did not resist the dry spasms but danced fantastically on the green carpet.

I was suddenly spent, weary past all belief, and I fell back on the bed telling myself, "I didn't enjoy it! I had to! I had to! I had to! I didn't enjoy it!" My right arm quivered senselessly, and looking down I saw that what I felt as a foreign object at its end was my fist, still clenched.

"You animal!" she cried, finding breath at last, and lifting toward me her ruined face, the tear-swelled eyes, the marred mouth, "Oh, you'll kill this one, too! You'll kill this one, too!" She was sitting up now on the floor, rocking back and forth, her belly cradled in a tender gesture that I could not misunderstand.

"You're pregnant again?"

"I wanted it so—I was going to tell you, to be born while you're gone. Oh, I hate you. No one can do this to me, no one. It's, it's—"

There was no word for that enormity, past speech, past tears; she rose unsteadily, tried silence, pressing her head against the window pane.

"Go wash your face. Put some cold water on that lip." She was so ugly injured, it was almost an offense; that, abominably, I could feel, but to what was crucial, that she had tricked me into fatherhood which perhaps with my blow I had undone, that her need to tell me had motivated our discrepancy of desire, to that I could not respond, dry, dry, dry—

"I didn't know," I said, "I really didn't know."

"Oh Lord, can't you count?" and adding the days I saw that I should have known, that it was so.

"Please, Viv, wash your face." I could not muster pity for her yet, but, uneasy, foresaw that bruised face, anomalous in the crowded station of my departure.

When she returned from the bathroom, from the noise of water and the one overheard sob, her face was shiny and blotched, a new trickle of blood distinct at one corner of her mouth that she had, astonishingly, lipsticked. "Oh, if you've killed it," she cried. "If you've killed it! How I hate you!"

"Oh, to hell with it all," I said, tired, through with anger.

Those were our last words until I had boarded the train. We slept that night badly (whenever I woke I could hear Vivian's breath, pretending sleep to mock my wakefulness), taut on the double bed, each rolled to his very edge, scrupulously not touching; aching and unrefreshed, we sat silent in the cab to the station, walked silent, a space between us, onto the platform.

It was only when the trainmen were bawling departure, the steam swirling about our legs, that I grabbed Vivian and she flowed into me without reserve; the sweet warm darkness of our mouths dissolved us to one pulsing; without forgiveness or pity, we submitted to each other. And we still did not speak. From my seat, the train moving, I saw her below me receding, receding, and her lips made without sound, "I love you" and I called the same, voiceless, to her diminishing image.

I had not killed the child; it was born seven months later, while I was in Pearl Harbor—a boy. I read the letter with the news in the loftlike lounge of the BOQ, between the blurred bleating of the radio and hushed conventional cries of the card-

players, and I tore the sheets crosswise, took up again the history of the Medes and Persians that insulated me from the compulsory evening camaraderie, the unremitting male heartiness, and the oblique exploitation of self-pity.

I stood no drinks, bought no cigars. It was weeks before I told anyone, though in the dark I practiced sometimes possible attitudes of acceptance; but I could project nothing susceptible to love, only imagine the monster native to my guilt and anger, thriving grossly at the breast toward eventual power and the realization of his licit hate.

Chiefly I avoided the fraternity of fathers, smokers of cigars, watchers of waistlines, who would pass from hand to indifferent hand, settling back at the end of dinner, the greasy photos of their kids; none marked really the faces dear to others ("Let me see. You have two boys?" "No, a girl." "Oh yes, I remember, a cute kid"), fixed each in his solipsist, smug idolatry, submitting evidence of potency, the reduplicated image. ("My youngest. Eighteen pounds and only ten months. I think I'll take ice cream on my pineapple, I skipped the potatoes.")

Vivian sent me a picture of David (the Beloved, a hopeful name), frog's body and the wrinkled dark head of a Filipino, like a nut-meat, making the mow of anguish from a tangle of sheets. I kept it, not knowing why, in my wallet. Once in Kobe, very drunk, I showed it to a middle-aged geisha, but when she bent to it the inevitable, honest tenderness of women, "Ah, *kawaii, naaa!* Dear baby!" I jerked it away. "Be still," I shouted, "you talk too much," and she bowed and bowed. "I have insulted you. I have committed an offense!" she hissed pitifully through her gold teeth.

But the war took my resentment, my regret, my violence achieved or rejected, and played them out as history. Unpurged and without music, I returned to peace, to the States.

Vivian knew I was en route, but I had not wired her the exact time of my arrival. It was no surprise I was planning, but once ashore, I did not know how precisely I could come home to that strangeness. I could foresee our house: disarrayed, hung with drying diapers and small sodden clothes, cluttered with the para-

phernalia of purification, folding bathtubs, oils and unguents and powders, to redeem for our finicky senses the lost stinking animal we bore; and over all, the interwoven pink and blueness, the ribbons, the soft, wooly covering that hoaxed no one, while at the center, the child, my son, David, chafed in his two excrements, tried against the incommensurate his only device, yelled and yelled.

And it came to me at the heart of my discomfiture, that the focus of distress was that unforgotten lie at Carrie's; that to set straight the meanings of that encounter, the meaning of Hal, would shrieve me of pastness, give me, for what I now addressed, a needed innocence. First, first, I must say to Carrie, "There is no ghost, no haunting not ourselves," then I could achieve return. It was my last self-deception.

I came without music to the street, the house, the door. Unsure, I waited while the bell made its catarrhal squawk in the imagined inner cube of dark and quiet. There was no footstep, no tremor, no pulse of answer; and I noticed, then, the newspapers and the milk bottles at my feet. Three days, I figured, or four, but before the thought could form "Carrie's gone away"—I smelled her.

I knew familiarly that smell by then, sweetish, turgid, its own definition; it seemed odd only in that context, leaking, thin and singular, through the crack between door and frame. Another day or two, I knew, and the milkman bent to his heedless routine would pause and retch; the janitor, called, insert his passkey in the lock, push open the door, holding his breath, to display darkness and the abominable remnant of Carrie's flesh. I would not call him, surely; I paid to that lonely death my shudder, and walked to the elevator, dropped swiftly from what parleyed in the unimaginable black, no longer my business. To have alone escaped that room seemed a sufficient victory.

Around the first corner I turned, a small girl was bouncing a ball, chanting in time to the throb of rubber against the pavement, "Bouncey, bouncey, ball-ee! I hope my sister fall-ee!" Her blond, intent face was screwed to a dwarf's malice, precocious and

in that sunlight startling. "Bouncey, bouncey, ball-ee! I hope my sister fall-ee!" and I felt welling in me for that congenital, inexpert evil an unexpected pity; knew that even as, with the ball, the wish, she fell, the child was congruous with my imperfect love.

"Bouncey, bouncey, ball-ee! I hope my sister fall-ee!"

"I hope she does," I said. It was as simple as that: the state of evil as the world of love, another innocence.

I knew then toward what I was turning, to what surrender my unmarked steps, my hardly believed-in tenderness were bearing me, faster, faster.

This is the apt ending, I thought, but it will not end here; to this revelation no experience can be adequate; this vision I shall accommodate to a hundred shabby betrayals of love; this imperishable capital squander in time. "Home to his Mothers house private return'd." That had seemed to Milton an ending. I could foresee how I would run down the last street, as when I was a boy late from play, be breathless when I arrived, sweating.

But first there would be the subway, a bus, time to figure out why that Miltonic line, incantatory and inapt, possessed me, "Home to his Mothers house private return'd." My suitcases wallopéd my hurrying legs. "Home to his Mothers house . . ." They banged my thighs, galling the damp flesh. It was not *my* mother, I thought childishly. "Home to his Mothers . . ." I would work on it.

An Expense of Spirit

I

I should perhaps begin by telling you that I am accustomed to live, as it were, with my left hand. It is not impossible that you have seen, through the flawed glass window of the shop where I work, my back bent toward some customer in the meaningless similitude of worship. You will have seen our mouths moving and our gestures: mine pleading, the customer's assured and peremptory, for at that moment she is queen, though queen only of me; and you will have guessed our words, inaudible to you in the bright shabby street. I am a shoe salesman, a shoe-dog my colleagues prefer to say, too frail and timorous to work ever in the great downtown stores, where each pants leg is creased to an ultimate sharpness, each skull, ferociously brushed and brilliantined, shines in the subdued light, and the quick crackle of conviction spreads from the insolent smile, the jaunty stride, noiseless on the thick carpeting.

Even in our shop, one of the smallest on a second-rate business

street, even behind our show window proffering its few outmoded styles in a hopeless jumble, I do not completely fit. "Please, Brandler!" the boss cries to me from time to time, "*please* —at least the glasses change! Those—those—" He can never find a word for the large black-rimmed spectacles behind which my face attains a pinched and solemn dignity that offends him. "Try, at least, a snappy pair pince-nez!" But he can do nothing, for the union protects me, and he is really, in a bitter and uncomprehending way, proud of the difference I assert.

I am a writer. As yet I have published nothing, and I am not brash enough to predict that I ever shall, though I have had some encouraging correspondence with one publisher and another, enough to assure me that I am not wholly without merit. There is, you will understand, an advantage in my position; committed neither to success nor failure, I am, in my writing, singularly *free*.

My job is a most fortunate one; weekdays I work from four in the afternoon until ten at night (it is usually, of course, eleven, for the boss is reluctant always to shut the door, admit that there will be no more customers), and on Saturdays until midnight. Our trade is drawn chiefly from among working people, to whom we offer beyond the simple opportunity to buy, the brightness of our neon-lighted front, that makes with the other five or six blocks of stores in our district a sort of nightly bazaar, through which before sleep, alone or in pairs, they parade, calling to each other words indistinguishable to us inside.

My two colleagues, who in general suspect my sanity, find confirmation of their doubts in my having chosen permanently the evening shift, which formerly was taken in turns every third week. But I am glad to have mornings and early afternoons always my own, for it is then that, properly, I live. In the store or in my rented room, where I return only to sleep or to find every third or fourth week with some casual girl what is called satisfaction, I live parenthetically, scarcely committing myself to consciousness. I spend next to nothing of that spirit I need to write; it is not false modesty that makes me tell you I have none to spare. My former friends, writers too, who have chosen to become teachers, journalists, or book reviewers, are, I know, wrong—dissipating in

daily life their irredeemable creative stuff; mine is the ideal arrangement.

It is only in the Public Library that I am able to write or, reading, feed the sources of my small power; it is there that I am not Hyman Brandler but Harry Brendon, my chosen name—not my father's son, but my own creation. I must, I suppose, know our Library, knowing it in love, better than anyone else: the dim mathematical stacks through which the guards eternally prowl to find the boy masturbating; the Communist mutilating the book that assails the Soviet Union; the ancient librarians in Fiction perpetually dozing from hostility over their rubber stamps; and more ancient even than they, the guardian of the men's room, trembling shamelessly on his secret stool in the broom closet, falling toward something more obscene than sleep. There is a modest sense of eternity here that even the nervous chatter of the very youngest librarians cannot impugn, a timelessness proper to my task which can never be finished, at least not without becoming something quite different.

Each morning I am among the first to arrive, waiting quietly on the stone steps between the stone Greek jars for the iron grille to be folded back, the glass doors to be opened. I rush up the marble inner steps to the reading room where the tables wait, long and polished, as if for a feast. The younger librarians nod to me, for I am a familiar figure, distinguished among the rabble of bums escaping the cold, their ruined faces bowed to unread newspapers, high school students glumly searching periodical indexes, and frantic old men compiling statistics for pamphlets on vegetarianism or currency reform.

Sometimes a friend (our friendship has shrunk to precisely this encounter) will seek me out at my customary place, and in a corner we will whisper of the progress of my current book in the hushed voices a library compels. But I speak to none of the habitués, nor do they offer to address me. Once, a young man who had sat beside me for nearly two months took to smiling at me and making various motions of the head inviting confidence, and I was forced to move. I did it with reluctance, for I had grown accustomed to my particular spot, and there is in the

habitual a kind of peace; besides, the young man in question had amused me with an odd nervous habit of pulling the skin of his neck, in an unbelievable fashion, up over his chin to the verge of his lower lip.

In those moments, experienced by everyone who tries to write, when words simply would not come, I found some solace in watching him guardedly, examining the texture of his neck, which seemed not a bit different from that of anyone else, until rapt (he read only poetry) he would pull the grotesque lap of flesh incredibly upward. That unforeseeable extension of the skin, useless, a little disgusting, but—somehow—a feat, seemed to me a just metaphor of my own work.

I find it hard to say why I, so unremittingly on guard against the casual encounter, the idle expense of conversation, went to the first of the Library's Sunday lectures on Great Books. That it was a mistake I must have known even then, but there was in their being given in the Library a specious warrant of familiarity, and in their being given on that day the appeal of the uncustomary. I had often walked past the dark unused buildings on Sunday, dismayed at the impenetrability, the rigor of the walls, as at a friend who passes in the street without a greeting. Once I had seen light moving inside and had pressed my face curiously against the glass doors, but I could make out no one in the faint glow, only the familiar curve of the main staircase. An unreasonable kind of jealousy moved me, and I had remained peering through the doors until someone shouted from behind me, in a coarse voice full of the supposed advantage of its knowledge, "Hey, bud! It don't open on Sundays!" But I had not even troubled to answer, though, stupidly, he had repeated the words three times.

As a matter of fact, I have always found Sundays difficult. True, I sleep late, having stayed up for a few drinks after work the night before. I go alone and never to the same bar two weeks in a row, but even so, sometimes I have to flee before the sodden confession of a fellow drinker, the insolent camaraderie of a bartender; one is never secure from the assault of openness, the demand for assent or sympathy that flourishes everywhere in our

world, in the barber chair or at the counter where one stops to buy a pair of socks.

I wake at noon, go down for a hasty lunch, and return to read the *New York Times* (we have no decent paper in our city) until late afternoon, when I walk alone to recapitulate the endless problems of my work. I explore always those parts of our city most remote from where I spent my boyhood and where now the children of those I can remember only as children shriek and fall and run for comfort into familiar houses. Once a month, however, I go to the home of my parents to listen to their known reproaches: why am I not, at my age, married? Why do I, an intelligent boy who has gone to college, work at such a job? It is what I owe them, and I pay the debt precisely, three hours from my greeting until, nodding to my father, kissing my mother's forehead, I depart, a package of cookies wrapped in a newspaper in my hand. "He is busy with his writing," my mother assures my father when I have gone. "Otherwise he would come oftener. Some day he'll be a Somebody—you'll see!" And my father, who has said nothing to begin with, of course does not reply.

But most important of all in my decision to attend that unfortunate meeting was, I am sure, the fact that I had just finished my second novel and, awaiting the responses of publishers, which to be sure I could foresee, was unable to begin anything new. My routine does not provide for such intervals; ideally, I suppose, I should undertake some unbroken series of works as long as my expected life, but I am, alas, not equal to even so modest an ideal as I have proposed.

I remember standing before the Library that day with a dim sense of profanation, checking my watch, the leaflet in my hand to be sure of the date, the time (somewhere the public reassurance of a steeple clock boomed twice the hour), and then committing myself to the door, trembling, I must confess, just a little. An attendant I did not recognize, seeing my hesitation just inside the entrance, asked almost inaudibly, "Great Books?" and at my nod, indicated a small door off the central corridor into which I had seen only librarians pass before. Retreat was impossible after my nod of affirmation and under that hostile stare,

so I pushed forward toward inevitable disappointment. No room could, I fear, have been adequate to my hope; but the strange face at the entry, the query scarcely heard, and the door I had never used justified surely more than the dim barren room I entered, inhabited by a score of chairs, a library table, like the dusty flora of a not quite desert.

There were already too many people present for the chairs, and the attendant thrusting ineptly into the room behind me with extra seats, nearly knocked me over onto my face. When I had recovered from the assault of his clumsiness (I have a certain native aplomb, unlooked for perhaps in one who ventures so seldom into public), I found myself seated or, more precisely, wedged in beside a large darkish man who overflowed relentlessly onto my seat. Though the room was not warm, he had taken off his coat, revealing great damp patches of sweat on his back and under his arms; he smelled of maleness as an animal does, an acrid but not wholly unpleasant odor.

It would be a shade melodramatic to say that he frightened me, but his very existence seemed a threat to my status; I was, at least, uneasy. Even before the proceedings started (someone indistinct through the tobacco smoke wrestled with a pile of papers on the table before us, as if they must be subdued before a beginning was possible), he jerked about in exaggerated spasms of impatience, endangering my precarious seathold.

I could hear a woman's voice beside him, though I could see nothing of her around his hugeness but a hand advocating patience in an occasional gesture. I felt it, though I do not customarily make such responses, as a charming hand. From time to time that immense head would turn toward me, with a pitiful attempt at stealth, in baffled recognition, but his wife's hand touching him gently would recall him to attention.

I found myself awaiting the turning of his head with an odd mingling of dread and expectancy; he had a strange, an utterly unforeseeable face, that contradicted, in what I could not help feeling was a tragic way, his body. It was not simply that it was a sad face, and yet somehow clearly intended for joy, but that it was irredeemably unaware of its sadness, incapable of knowing it;

its sorrow was physical only, a sorrow of the muscles, of bone. It never occurred to me that I knew him.

Even at that point, I think, nothing need have happened, had I not (it seemed harmless enough and I could not, in any case, have helped it) fallen asleep. I am not, looking back, ashamed of it; there was no courtesy, for with the light against the heavy lenses of my glasses I ran little risk of being noticed, and I do not, of course, snore. It seemed the proper response to the scarcely audible, lisping presentation of the speaker. I could make out only the most familiar words: "idea," "matter," "justice," but the speaker's haughty finical face swelled in the haze of tobacco smoke, agitated by some unsuspected ventilation, his exaggerated motions of emphasis beginning from the hip, his tweed jacket, too elegant for our grimy streets, grew larger—larger—then—

"Congratulations! I couldn't have done better myself!" The bulky man beside me was thumping me awake with a beefy palm, whooping meanwhile most vulgarly with what he apparently took for good humor.

"I must have been asleep." It was, I fear, an absurd remark, but I was scarcely awake and the crowd that had risen, unwilling quite yet to depart, threatened to turn its idle malice upon us. We were a curious pair, and someone already had begun to laugh.

"You can say that again, my friend," he bellowed, and, quite abruptly, "I know you!"

I remembered him then, of course, that giant body bare before me in the long lines at the Induction Center; I do not willingly recall those terrible hours when all my hard-won integrity pulsed naked and afraid under those prodding fingers. The doctors had kept us together, making use of our disparity (I am somewhat under middle height), as one of them put it, "for the laughs."

"Yes," I said with what I hoped was apparent coldness, turning to go. "Yes. How have you been?"

He reached out a great soggy paw, and held me by the arm, helpless. "Hey, wait now. That isn't polite. We're sort of buddies,

after all." He must have seen me wince at the obnoxious epithet, the gross assumption of familiarity, for, not releasing his hold, he turned to his wife, turning me about with him, will-less and baffled like a sulky child. "This is my old buddy—" He stopped for the name, mocking me.

"Brandler," I said, managing, I think, some dignity despite the fact that I was barely touching the floor, "Hyman Brandler."

"You're Noel's friend?" his wife asked, and her few words, her smile were conspiratorial; in that instant she had somehow assured me that she knew his grossness, my plight. "I've met so few of his wartime—"

"Just a buddy!" Noel shouted across my attempt to speak. "He made five bucks for me."

"I—"

"You nothing!" he cried with a hostility I could not understand; he had released his hold at last, but had wedged me securely between his body and the wall. "I took one look at you—one look, mind you, in that line. It was in the old Armory, and I said to the guy behind me, 'I'll give you five to one that *this* joker gets rejected.' 'Hell,' this guy says, 'in this man's army, if he can walk—'"

"Noel!" his wife interrupted, feeling perhaps that so crude an onslaught might embarrass me. "Noel, we're supposed to—"

I may, indeed, have blushed. I do not have a bad limp, but it is noticeable, particularly when I am distraught. The examining psychiatrist told me that very day that I *want* the limp, that I cling to it as at once a kind of revenge against my father and a punishment of myself. I find it, removed now from those painful circumstances, and as a theory, not improbable, though long since I have learned to face the truth: my father had intended only to punish me in the way he had been taught was right, for he is an honorable, and was then, though it is difficult now to believe, a passionate man. "You'll excuse me, Mrs.—"

"Johnson. Ann Johnson."

"Mrs. Johnson," I went on. "I know you have other plans—" She was, and I speak with some authority seeing many women in the way of business, a person of unusual charm; under what

surely must have been exacerbating provocation, she maintained that crisp cleanliness, at once cool and exciting, that one does not hope to find outside the ads in women's magazines, attained only for an instant and before cameras.

"No!" Noel cried out in his immense rusty voice. "Stay! Stay! I'll buy you a drink!" He moved forward, pushing me closer to his wife, and roaring as if at the best of jokes. "4F," he explained, "4F. You'll like him, an intellectual—"

"Just a shoe salesman," I murmured in pointless self-abnegation, which I resented the next instant. It was like facing one's father: the vague sense of guilt, the inexplicable onslaught of what can only be hatred. What had I done, what *was* I that justified his rage?

"Intellectual, my intellectual buddy!" Disorganized and frightened, I had talked that day as openly as a child to everyone. "My 4F intellectual buddy. You'll have a lot in common with her—" He pointed clumsily at his wife. "You two can talk about literature—" It was perhaps himself he was mocking; he was not drunk, though it would have been comforting to think so, merely—impossible.

"Timothy!" Mrs. Johnson called out with evident pleasure, as the day's speaker sauntered toward our intolerable interview. "Mr. Brandler, this is Timothy Cargill. Wasn't he *exciting!*?"

As Timothy thanked her, reddening slightly, Noel drew me toward him with an imperative hand. "Used to room at our house," he explained, with the merest pretense of not wishing to be overheard. "Got rid of him. Teaches at the Junior College. Charming fellow!" He waved his hand, to make sure I did not take his adjective literally, in an exaggerated effeminate gesture. "Cargill, here's another intellectual!" He slapped my back again grossly, but somehow with less conviction; I had the preposterous momentary impression that he was frightened.

Quite close, Timothy Cargill smelled improbably of lilacs; I was aware at first only of something indefinably anomalous in the impact of his nearness, something that suggested the gentle presence of clean old ladies and that sorted oddly with the series of bitter curves that composed his face. He smiled at me briefly.

"Smells pretty, don't he?" Noel remarked in his enormous undertone. His wife did not respond, or even seem to look at him, but, I do not know quite how to say it, the distance between them sensibly increased.

"Ann," Cargill said, apparently unruffled, "your blouse, that color! With your hair, your eyes, it's a—*discovery!* You're another Columbus. Don't you think so, Noel?"

Even the obviously inappropriate name seemed in his mouth a precise insult, and the mocking question hung in our midst, unanswered. Before Timothy's ambiguity of sex, Noel's masculinity seemed somehow shameful, an inexcusable crudity. No one knew how to begin again, until Timothy, more bored certainly than embarrassed, fumbled for a moment in his pockets. "Mr. Brandler, we're fellow—criminals. Do you have a cigarette?"

As I shook my head regretfully (it would have bolstered my self-esteem to have been able to make some real response to anything in that situation), Mrs. Johnson held out a full silver case, offering it first to Cargill, and then, with an odd little bow of ironic sympathy, to me. In a strange day, it was not the strangest thing that occurred, but remembering now in tranquillity the whole adventure, I am most dismayed at the small folly that followed; when routine collapses, it seems to warn me, anything can happen. I took a cigarette, a light proffered by Timothy, and had the lit cigarette between my lips before I remembered that I do not smoke!

Mrs. Johnson, whom I have never seen since (and indeed, what occasion could ever draw us together), I will always remember at that moment, watching me, casual yet somehow uneasy, though she could not possibly have suspected my plight, for I smoked that cigarette down to a stub, even inhaling, lest I expose myself, with some fortitude until my eyes watered and I feared for a while that I would be sick. It seemed the least I could do for her, and I feel it in my somewhat uneventful life as a chivalric, almost a courtly, instant.

"Timothy, you were good," Mrs. Johnson was saying when I was able again to hear, "*really* good! Of course, I know very little about Plato—"

"Plato—a fascist! Socrates—a worse fascist!" A middle-aged, untidy man had thrust between our shoulders an emphatic head, something just short of madness in the frantic eyes, the compulsive facial gestures. A moment later his body followed. "Goodman, a plumber!" he declared himself in his spasmodic phrasing, and sensing our bewilderment, "Goodman—the name. Plumber—the profession." And he added, to make sure we had not forgotten the occasion of his materialization, "Plato—a fascist!"

"You'll have to define your terms, Mr. Goodman," Timothy rebuked him with the mild disdain of the schoolteacher.

"Terms!" The word apparently enraged him beyond control. "An academician! Listen, young man—when the Republicans took from Franco Toledo, where do you think was the last stand from the fascist militia, *hah?*" He stopped dramatically, his eyes plunging from one of us to another in desperate patience. "No answer. I, Goodman, I'll tell you. In the University. In the office from the Philosophy Department. Terms!" He subsided into a furious and triumphant silence.

"That's no answer. Answer Mr. Cargill—he said define your terms!" It was a new voice, truculent, not quite certain, and looking up I saw that the young man who had sat beside me in the reading room, the one with the extraordinary neck, had joined us. It seemed to me strange that he had appeared on so trite a phrase, like anyone. I wondered if, perhaps, he were wholly unconscious of his strange skill.

Goodman jerked his head forward in violent recognition and disgust. "You! You, I know, Professor Simone." The boy, it appeared, taught literature occasionally as a substitute in our high schools. "Back to your ivory tower!"

"Answer him, that's all," Simone persisted, almost whining; "just answer him."

I do not recall quite how it happened, but a few moments later we were all (except Mrs. Johnson who had gone off saying something about a baby-sitter) in a beer joint around the corner, screaming at each other. For the first time in my life, I had left the Library without pausing on the steps to permit myself a full awareness of it: the peace from which, for a little, I departed, and

to which I would return. Noel held me tight with one hand; he must have grabbed me in the street to prevent, God knows why, my slipping off, and now he had simply forgotten his grasp. He did not join our discussion ever, but would squeeze my arm, when something obscurely moved him, inside his immense unheeding clasp until I almost screamed in pain. It was his money, a crumpled wad he laid on the table before him, that bought our beers, and he watched fiercely to be sure he was getting his money's worth; we performed like beasts, incapable of knowing what would please the onlooker.

At first Timothy talked, quickly, delicately, but with only half-concealed ennui, lapsing quite soon, or pretending to, into drunkenness, and in the end I was the only one who persisted against Goodman's spasms of abuse and anguish. Simone would follow our points with great nods of agreement, or noiseless expostulations of dissent, fingering his neck, and sweating profusely, but his only spoken comment was the interjection with which he had begun. "You didn't answer him! That's no answer. That's—" and he would, apparently with the sense of having contributed something, sink mumbling beneath the tide of argument. Speech is for me customarily a temptation rigorously suppressed, but that evening the few beers, the sense of an outrageous holiday, betrayed me into indulgence, an orgy of words, while Noel, remote, bitterly compelled me, his great head cupped in one hairy paw, the other still clutching me. He listened, not in the contempt I would have expected, but avidly, as if at any moment we might solve the riddle he could not himself even pose.

I remember clearly only the end of our talk. "Love!" Goodman had cried, and it was somehow the point toward which the long evening had been bearing us, far past supper and vaguely hungry, but held by some more ultimate hunger to that table, those words. Only Noel watched in silence from the furry ambush of his hand, unable to afford drunkenness or speech; his head moved from speaker to speaker intently and pain sat without conviction in his eyes. "Love—a lie! Love your neighbor! Love! Charity! These words, I hate. Tell the truth, who can we love? A neighbor? Not

even our wives, our children, not even ourselves. A certain camaraderie, yes, allowances we make—yes—”

“But look now,” I tried to begin, “in the *Symposium*—”

“Plato!” he screamed. “Be frank, now. Love each other we don’t, but a little frankness we can afford. Plato, what is he really? A fascist, I won’t say. A bugger, no?” He pointed a violent finger at Timothy. “Professor, about such things you should know. I ask you—a bugger? Am I right?”

Timothy, obscurely offended, only sniffed at him, touched his hair in an elegant gesture of indifference; his face was red, meant nothing. I answered for him, I who ordinarily, and on principle, prefer reticence, “It doesn’t matter. We begin sometimes in the flesh, sometimes by-pass it, but the important thing is somehow and at last to achieve what escapes the definition of the flesh—” I had the sense of speaking for once incisively, to the point; it was as if I had merely imagined the rejoinder in my room. Noel had moved his hand, my aching arm downward in a baffled gesture of protest.

“Love!” Goodman could bear it no longer; he jumped up and down in his place. “Theology! What do I see when you say this word: the priests, the banners, and in the hands—guns! Love! A word that kills people. It’s such a—so—so—” He almost said “Christian,” but at the last moment checked it under my glance (we were the only two Jews present, and beneath our dispute he trusted me to guide him). “—So Evangelical! Lo-o-o-o-ve, this fake sweetness and the women slit up the—”

“Crap!” Noel had risen, reluctantly, but confessing as he heaved us both upward that there was, after all, here too, no wisdom, no hope. He seemed still quite sober.

Goodman was not through, but clutching at Noel across the table, he cried, “Do I need love? In *my* life is there love? In this jungle, this America, a word only—Who needs it?”

“Crap,” Noel said again, dragging me toward the door. “Let’s go.”

“Stay a little,” Goodman shrieked. “Late it’s not. We’ll talk—another beer—stay!”

Noel was plunging outward faster now, annoyed, kicking a chair out of his way. Timothy, I saw looking backward over my shoulder, was asleep; Simone—I had not missed him—was not in sight. “Good night!” I yelled.

“Come better to my house. Beautiful, I can’t say it is—a few miserable sticks furniture—” There was the pulse of an uncontrollable urgency in Goodman’s voice. “I have a couple bottles beer on ice—”

“Good night,” I cried again, fighting for my footing, almost at the door. “Goodman, good night!”

“You’ll come next week. We’ll all meet here after the discussion. A regular thing. A good talk—” His voice trembled toward silence. “Bandler, you at least—” he called after us, without certainty, and looking backward through the plate-glass door, I saw him for the last time, shaking Timothy’s elegant dumb shoulder, furiously and in vain.

“Crap!” Noel shouted at the closed door, and “Crap!” once more as the dark autumnal air bitterly assailed our hot, damp faces. “That guy’s nuts!”

“Yes,” I said, “he’s really nuts.” I felt somehow as if I had betrayed, assenting so easily, his last appeal, and more, had undone in the casual judgment my father, myself. Surely, I had more in common with the abandoned Jew than with this gross, violent hulk. “He’s lonely,” I added quickly, “lonely.”

“Lonely,” Noel said quite softly; it was the first time I had heard his voice in anything less than a shout. “He’s lonely! Holy Christ.” In what was surely anguish, he released my arm at last, but it was no longer possible for me to leave him.

“That fairy,” he said with the air of continuing, as if we had been, all the time not knowing it, on that very subject, and he waved backward contemptuously toward the saloon we were leaving, “that god-damn literary—who the hell even knows if he is a fairy? He looks like one, don’t he?” We had moved together toward his parked car; for me there was no question of choice, and as we drove off through the booming lighted streets I did not even trouble to notice where we were headed. “Well, don’t he?”

“Doesn’t he *what*?” It was hard for me to stay awake; the

strange exhilaration to which I had yielded blurred around its edges to sleep.

"Look like a fairy to you?"

"Who?"

"Holy Christ, who? Cargill. Timothy Cargill."

"Could be," I said, still not quite certain what was at stake and unwilling to offend him. Noel didn't seem satisfied, but drove in furious silence toward darker streets lined with trees and the pale shadows of private houses. Once, feeling I had not met his challenge, I said again, "Could be," but he would not even turn toward me.

"My house," he said finally, in vast disgust, pulling up to the curb, but he made no move to get out. "Look," he said patiently, "you can't be drunk on six beers. You read books. I'm not a dolt myself. I read things, too. Christ, it's no *crime* to read the *Saturday Evening Post*. But this Proust, this Joyce—they beat me. What the hell!"

I understood. I am not used to the messiness of such situations in real life, but the problems of fiction are not without their own complexity, and it is impossible to deal with them for long without acquiring a certain acuity. "You are trying to tell me that this Timothy has interested your wife in Proust and Joyce and you don't like it?"

"Hell, that ain't the half of it. Let her read what she likes, it's a free country. But she looks at me as if—as if she's *sorry* for me. I mean, when I want her she's not *there*. Not really there." He looked at me without hope, poking a thick, contemptuous finger at my chest. "Look! Look at this arm. I'm *there*, I've always been there. What a woman wants I've got. Hell, you wouldn't know."

I laughed nervously, not knowing what to say and wishing I were in my own room preparing for bed, warming my final cup of coffee on the single electric burner. We got out of the car, Noel leaping for the pavement as if it were a smoking beach; I half expected him to shout, "This is it!" and giggled sharply in the dark, but if he heard me he made no sign.

Through a slightly open window, music was coming toward us, thick, tangled atonal chords, somewhat absurd in that quiet sub-

urban street. It is not the kind of music I would myself have chosen, preferring (I have a small record-player in my room) the gentler resolutions of the seventeenth century, but I was struck for the moment by its sense of conflict: the player fighting the genius of his instrument, the development, the logic of melody. It was a triumph of the will, raw, showy, *there*; Noel should have liked it, but he didn't get it.

"You see," he said to me as if it were some flagrant evidence of infidelity. "You see! He lends her those albums," and opening the door, he bellowed, "Shut it off!"

She must have turned it off as we entered, for the room rang with the sudden silence as he bent, ineptly, to kiss her, an ill-assured gesture of possession before which, a little, she seemed to flinch. I could not be sure, for seeing me she turned what reflex of repulsion she had betrayed into a mock gesture of horror. "Strong drink!" she said, rolling the *r*'s melodramatically. "You smell like a brewery!" and to me, "Why, it's Mr. Bandler. Come in." People do not usually remember my name, and so I entered with a small glow of satisfaction. I am accustomed to watch people closely, for in the shoe business and in writing alike, accurate psychological discrimination is indispensable, and so I did not miss the automatic movement of Mrs. Johnson's hand to her forehead; just above and beside the left eye, powdered carefully but visible in the fall of light, there was a bruise.

"Would either or both of you like something to eat?" she asked.

"No!" Noel bellowed, glaring down the declaration of hunger that trembled on my lips.

We sat in silence for a moment and then, "Talk!" he said, looking from me to his wife. "Talk, why don't you. I've brought you a real live nickel-plated broken-down intellectual. Do your stuff!"

I looked in misery at the floor, incapable of speech, not even daring again to turn my eyes toward Mrs. Johnson. I will not tell you what fantastic declarations and gestures proposed themselves to me in the succeeding moments of terrible silence.

Noel was walking up and down the room with a jarring stride that kept the bric-a-brac trembling. "Talk, God damn it—and

don't tell me I don't give my wife everything her little heart desires. A real live intellectual, pickled in six beers, and I brought him back singlehanded. Go ahead—talk about *literature*." He began to laugh, pounding his chest. "Maybe I embarrass you?"

"Noel," she began, without, I am sure, anything to say really in mind, just to be speaking, but just then a baby began to cry somewhere in the house. "Noel—the baby—"

He did not appear to hear her. "Talk," he cried, "why don't you *talk*!"

She tried again. "Noel—the baby—"

"Well, take care of it, damn you. I'm going out." He grabbed our coats from the chair where he had dropped them and was at the door.

"Good night, dear," she called, near tears I was sure, though her voice betrayed nothing. "Good night, Mr. Bandler." An uncustomary access of rage shook my body, and I looked hopelessly down at my meager arms. In the car, where I sat as far from Noel as I could, he turned on me ferociously. "If you were wondering, I beat her. I like it! You should try it sometime."

"I—I—"

"Shut up!" he said.

I find it difficult to remember more than snatches of the rest of that night; why I did not somehow leave him I have never been able properly to explain to myself. We drank with a single-mindedness and fury I would not have believed possible, moving from place to place, and in each of them Noel seemed, at least to my wavering eye, no less sober, though sometimes he would thump his gross resonant body without mercy, roaring, "A man, God damn it—a *man*. No one has to look twice at me!" For an hour at a time he would talk to me gently, pleading with me not to leave him, gripping my shoulders with his brute frantic hands, and then, in an inexplicable surge of malice, scream at me over a drink, "Drink it down, God damn it! I'm paying for it." But when I would raise the glass to my lips, he would thump my back suddenly, making me sputter and choke, while the whole bar rang with drunken laughter.

When the last saloon had closed, we went into a hamburger

stand for a cup of coffee; there was in the place, in the shining silver urns that mocked our faces, the quiet whirr of the ventilating fans and the soft sizzling of frying hamburgers, a kind of peace that seemed to invade even Noel. He sat on the stool that beneath his great hams looked absurdly small, his head in his hands, that martyred, inarticulate face relaxed over the almost antiseptic whiteness of the counter; he looked like sleep and I dared for the first time to yield to my own weariness.

A couple of high school kids barged in behind us, loud in the hushed drone of the place, letting a wedge of cold into the somnolent warmth of our refuge. "What a babe," one of them was saying, "yah-hoooo!" and "Quiet, shmo," the other. I could imagine without turning around the terrible pinched cockiness of their faces, the skin marred with hair and pimples, the meaningless canny eyes that did not yet know they would some day die. They had left the door open and a mean blast, chill with the last of darkness, swept in on us.

"Shut the door," Noel growled, not looking up.

The kids did not move or answer.

"Shut the door!" Noel roared.

"Things are tough all over," one of them said in a scared nasty voice.

"I'll shut it," I offered, fearing a senseless row when we had seemed so near peace.

"The hell you will—"

"Shut it, Chick," one of the kids was saying. "What do we want trouble?"

"Quiet, jerk!" Chick sneered, more assured now, and he began to hum, "He's too fat for me. . . ."

"You little bastard," Noel said lurching toward him. "Shut it!"

"Make me," the kid said.

I suppose there is a way of dealing with such situations, but my life has not prepared me for it; before I quite knew what was happening, the two of them were outside, and before I, or indeed even the other kid or the counterman, could intervene, it was all over. Noel had cocked a meaty fist but before he could get set on his shaky legs, the kid had kicked him in the groin—

hard—and run. I could hear the other boy pounding after him, his voice clear in that absolute hush just before the first morning streetcar runs, “What the hell’s with you—an old man!”

Noel was sitting on the ground, screaming and cursing, tears running scandalously across his great face; he yielded himself to them almost voluptuously, as if they were a satisfaction he had never dreamed. It was something of a task for me and the counterman to heave him to his feet, half carry, half drag him to the waiting car. It would have been, I suppose, no more than an adequate revenge to abandon him then and there, but as the pain eased off, it left him all at once atrociously drunk, and I could not, in all conscience, do it. I fished the car keys out of his pocket and drove him to my room, though I do not drive well under any circumstances, and he would pummel me from time to time, screaming, “Man—man—maybe he’s not—*there!*”

My efforts to revive him with coffee were quite vain, and when he slipped at last to the floor from the chair in which I had propped him, I left him there and went to bed.

Sometime after dawn I woke to find him trying to batter his way out through the door I am always careful to lock. “Why don’t you try it open?” I said, and then regretting my poor irony, “Are you all right?”

“All right,” he muttered with some effort and, turning the lock, fell face forward across the sill; but he got up again with astonishing agility and turned at the head of the stairs. I could sense from the careful adjustment of his body, the slowness of his speech, that he felt himself on the verge of some great revelation. “Man,” he said. “Love—A pansy of the fields. Holy Christ!”

I do not know how, or indeed if, he ever got home. Needless to say, I never went to another of the discussion meetings, and in a week or two I had achieved again something of my old equilibrium, though, to tell the precise truth, I have never been able to summon up quite the old quota of vigor and resolve. Each morning I stand on the stone steps, ascend eagerly to where the tables, long and polished, await my coming, but I am not quite the same. With so marginal a spiritual economy as mine, such splurges are paid for through a lifetime of insufficiency.

Next day I discovered, where Noel had taken his last tumble, a complete upper plate, which he has never, of course, returned to claim. I use it to this day as a somewhat macabre paperweight. The occasional girls, who, by necessity, I bring into my room, are sometimes amused finding the plate, but, learning it is not mine, quickly lose interest. To me, however, the denture is, besides a trophy and a warning, an unflagging joke, quite real though difficult to define.

Nobody Ever Died from It

There is no use beating about the bush. Not only will I never write the story of Abie Peckelis that I have begun a hundred times, but I am no longer even a writer. My novel, once within an ace of being published, lies untouched and dusty on a shelf; and tomorrow I will open my own shoe store: The New Bon-Ton Home Bootery, Hyman Brandler, Proprietor. Imagine it!

I tell myself that in two years at the outside I will be bankrupt, but it is no use. Store or no store, I am what I am. Each day when I shave, I look at the middle-aged shoe salesman under the lather, and suddenly I want to weep or giggle—I hardly know which. Here is the face of a man who at thirty-five has published nothing, who owns his own store, who has even sent himself a floral horseshoe inscribed: SUCCESS!

What am I doing shaving such a face, I who from the time I was twelve was sure that I would become a great writer. I could not sleep at night because of the fury of my ambition; and I

would walk the floor sick with impatience for the future, until my mother would call out in fear, "Who is it? Who? What? What?" Please understand me, I am not whining. God forbid! I know well enough that the only answer is to laugh. Why do you suppose that every year I apply for a Guggenheim Fellowship in writing, listing as references my grocer; a whore in Jersey City, the sister of a close friend; and my third-grade teacher now ten years dead!

Sometimes, I must confess, I catch myself hoping that by some quirk I will be granted a Fellowship after all; but each year I am refused, of course—as I should be. And yet, who can tell, given the chance, the three thousand lousy bucks, a little house in the country not too far from New York, could I not write a comic novel that would define the sensibility of a whole generation, become the Rabelais of the shoe-dogs?

At least I could write the story of Abie Peckelis and the Quick Christmas Eve. I have no trouble, you understand, in telling the story by word of mouth. At parties, my friends who have heard the story a hundred times invariably turn to me at the point in the evening when one must laugh or go home. "Hy," they plead, knowing I will not fail them, "tell us about Peckelis." And if there is a newcomer present, it becomes a test. Woe betide him if he sits there straight-faced or only snickers politely. He is written off forever as a *shmuck*.

I do not think that my friends really believe the story; they think of it rather as something that I have invented especially for them; and it has become part of the ritual of our get-togethers, as essential as the jokes about waistlines and baldness and numbers of children. Such things are important to us, now that some of us have reached forty. Forty! A moment ago it was the age of our parents.

I begin always by describing Peckelis: the identical oily ridges of his marcelled hair, and sullen droop of his fat lips, the eyelids as heavy as if hewn in stone. I think of his face in profile—despite the blueness of his beard, the face of a wicked queen in an Assyrian bas-relief; a face ravaged by passions it does not understand—and set anomalously on the flabby body in the draped

jacket, the peg-top pants. It is an ugly body, uglier because borne with such outrageous assurance of its allure: the swollen female breasts visible beneath the sag of the coat from the padded shoulders, the movement of the hips a parody, savage and tender, of womanly charm.

I was fourteen then, a stock boy at my first job, in my first shoestore. Fourteen! A child born in that year would be ready to vote in November; and even my memories of that time can be said to have attained their majority. I worked then only on Saturdays, thinking of those twelve hours in a shoestore as a parenthesis in my life. I remember myself on the way to work, the only one it seemed to me then fully awake among the half-sleeping adult workers on the streetcar. I can still feel my eagerness and my fear; and for the moment I seem to be jolted again on the straw seat, my hair damp and unnaturally plastered back. I am wearing knickers; I have never shaved. Suddenly, I am on the sidewalk, the sun dazzling after the gloom of the trolley; and there is the store-front, the orange neon sign blinking its simple-minded assertion over the doorway: FIVE DOLLARS—\$5—FIVE DOLLARS.

Once inside, the smell of the store assails me: a dead female odor of sweat and leather, perfume and dust. It has been all of fifteen years since I entered that store, but I feel myself once more walking down the long aisle, past the six mirrors, past the unoccupied stools before each row of chairs, the seats of which have not yet been turned down for the business of the day. I enter the back room to set down, beside the bottles of shoe dye, the extra sock linings and the stacks of cork inner soles, my bag of lunch, which I have carried nonchalantly under my arm, the spot of grease concealed against my side. I hope no one has noticed the package, for I consider it degrading to be forced to eat sandwiches instead of going out to a cafeteria.

Delivered of the lunch, I walk the length of the store in reverse, saying good morning to the blue denim back of George, the porter, bent over his mop; good morning to Mr. Z., the manager, reading the day's directives in the cashier's cage; good morning to the hose girls moving stockings from boxes to the display

cases. I try to walk like a real shoe-dog, banging my heels down hard, smiling broadly when I "give the time of day," as Mr. Z. has urged me; for I hope that at sixteen I will be given a job as salesman, be able to work my way through college.

It is hard to believe that a few weeks after I had gone to work, after I had already met Peckelis, my mother, silent and embarrassed, put into my hand a little book about sex and procreation. It was only the Saturday before, I remember, that the hose girls had given me a package for Abie Peckelis, a birthday present done up in our fanciest gift wrapping.

Those hose girls! They did not deliberately mock me, I am sure, for they were from the first a little afraid of me, aware that I was writing a novel about the store; and the manager, who was our next-door neighbor and had given me the job as a favor to my parents, must have told them by then that I was a "genius." "That Herman," he would say. "At his age, he's already a writer. Some day we'll be proud to say we worked with him in the same store." Which did not prevent him from using the word genius as a term of abuse when my shyness or clumsiness annoyed him. And, as you should already be aware, my name is "Hyman" not "Herman"—a fact of which I was never able to convince Mr. Z. or any of the rest of the crew.

I would have given a lot to be able to kid with the hose girls as some of the salesmen did; but though in my bed at night I often thought of offhand cracks to set them giggling, my actual conversation with them usually boiled down to a noncommittal grunt in answer to the occasional question, "How's the book coming, kid?" And so I was proud to be the messenger boy between them and Abie.

When I handed him the package, he shook it cautiously, smelled it, then tucked it coyly into his bosom. "I'll look later. Maybe it's something private. After all, I'm only sixteen!" But when we all protested, he opened the wrappings and drew out two round red Christmas tree ornaments attached to a limp hot-dog. He performed his delight as we all expected him to: hugging himself, squealing with pleasure, even doing a little dance—one finger wagging in the air, his butt out, and his pointed suede

shoes sliding on the waxed floor, what was then called "truck-ing."

Finally, dangling the thing before him, he gurgled, "OOOOH, daddy, I love it!" while the whole crew (we had just closed the store and were beginning to drop the stock) rocked with laughter. Only I did not laugh. I wanted to, you understand, but I choked on the first forced guffaw. Why did I not laugh, I who was to make my friends laugh over this very event so many times? It is no use asserting, as I did to myself then, that it was because I had read Freud and understood such matters. Embarrassed and even (it costs me nothing to admit it now) blushing, I pretended to be thirsty, rushing back to the water cooler, so that no one would notice me.

For reasons which I do not understand even yet, Abie felt it necessary to explain himself to me. "Don't get the wrong idea," he would hiss damply into my ear. "I only make fun for the boys. I only make fun!" and he would wriggle his buttocks in sheer earnestness. Or he would catch me sometimes by the water cooler or outside the can and clutch me by the shoulder. "You're my friend," he would insist, as I tried not to flinch under his too-clean hand. "You got a education, a brain in your head. You got *sechel*. Not like these other dogs." He would pretend to lower his voice, putting his powdered jaw within an inch of mine and spraying me with spit. "False! False! They're all false. Only you understand. Four walls!" He would regard me hopefully out of his moist cow eyes. "You understand? Four walls." And I who understood nothing for all my Freud and could never say a word to him, would nod dumbly.

"A education!" he would continue, sighing ruefully. "Me—I never got past the third grade." Then pulling himself erect in a sudden change of mood, he would slap his own face hard so that each finger left a distinct purplish welt. "Abie Peckelis, stand up! How much is two and two?" A pause, and then triumphantly, "Eleven!" "What's the capital of Philadelphia?" This time, he would step back as if baffled, hang his head for an instant, and then glowing, "Boh-livier? Right?" And in sheer self-congratulation, he would hit himself again, twice, three times.

I met him only once outside of the store, when he sat down next to me on the bus I was riding home from high school. I had a pile of books in my lap and he picked them up one by one, thumbing through them without really looking at them. "Al-ge-brā," he said proudly, pleased with himself for being able to pronounce the word. "Study! Study! So you shouldn't be a bum like poor Peckelis. Make from yourself something. Be a something not a nothing like me." All at once he seemed overwhelmed with self-pity. "Poor Peckelis," he screamed at the top of his voice. "Poor Abie! Poor Florence!"

"Florence?" I asked, glancing up uneasily at the smirking faces around us, and wondering how soon I dared get off.

"Certainly, Florence! Only my dear friends call me that. A joke. I make fun for the boys." By that time, everyone on the bus was turning to crane at us and I, writhing in my seat, was trying to disappear inside the collar of my overcoat. But Peckelis, unabashed, wheeled on the eavesdroppers, crying out more shrilly than before, "Dogs! What are you listening to? Come closer, you might miss something. Garbage!"

"Believe me," he continued, patting my shoulder, "stay in school. Study. What's more important? Diamonds isn't everything! Look at me. I didn't go to school." He put the sleeve of his beige polo coat into my hand. "Feel it! What are you afraid of? Two hundred and fifty dollars! But what am I. A bum in a two-hundred-and-fifty-dollar coat. A no-good. Could a mama be proud of Abie Peckelis? Tell the truth!"

Without waiting for an answer, he went on to tell me about how he had been in jail twice. Once he had been picked up for impersonating a female; but they had not even held him overnight, for he had screamed so loud in the men's cell block, the scream of a woman frantic to be had, that they had thrown him out. "The prisoners are going crazy," they had told him, "beat it!"

"But I like it in here," he had protested. "I got no place to go." As they had hustled him out the door, he had cried back over his shoulder, "At least you could say *please!*" Later, he had been picked up again, this time on a dope charge, though he had only,

he assured me and the openly listening bus, been holding the stuff for a dear friend. "When you don't have a education, who believes you?"

After his first night in jail, he had come home to find his bags packed and thrown into the alley beside his house. His mother ("A beautiful woman, she should drop dead, big around like a barrel!") had locked him out, refused even to talk to him through the closed door, until he had screamed up at her from the street so loud that the neighbors had come out to cheer him on. "False!" he had accused her. "False! Your own son you're killing. What's the matter, I don't give you twenty-five dollars a week for board?"

Finally, she had thrown up a second-story window, stuck out her broad rump at him, waving a hand on either side in a gesture of contempt, the way a small boy thumbs his nose. Abie rose out of his bus seat to imitate the gesture for me, putting aside his blond overcoat, pulling up the skirts of his long, draped jacket, and bending over as if in a doctor's office. When a woman standing next to us in the aisle tittered, he interrupted himself only for a minute. "Excuse me. Lean over a little further—maybe you'll fall over on that face. It could only be an improvement."

He turned back to me slowly, very solemn now. "You're good to your mama, Herman?" I managed to nod. "Good, good. Be good to your mama. You have only one. My own, God rest her soul, she was not such a good person, but—mamas you can't buy. The important things you can't buy. Am I right?"

"No," I answered stupidly. "Yes. I mean—"

"Two-hundred-and-fifty-dollar coats you can buy. But a education, a mama—" He clasped my hand as I rose to get off, two stops before my own. "You're a smart boy with a golden heart. You understand. I only make fun for the boys."

It was that night that I began to put down the notes that have become the story I cannot write. I read Krafft-Ebing, Stekel, even Proust; and I would pump the other salesmen for Peckelis stories, even resist the queasy temptation to slip away when Abie himself came to confide in me his contempt for the others, his loneliness, his faith in my understanding. I sit now with the old, hand-written sheets before me; but I cannot bear to read

again my callow comments, and I do not need their prompting to evoke Abie.

I can see him now stopping abruptly in the middle of the long aisle (it is, let us say, four o'clock in the afternoon of the Saturday before Palm Sunday, and every woman who can walk is in search of a new pair of shoes) and grabbing himself between the legs, dropping whatever he is carrying to the floor. "Ooooooh," he would scream in an anguished falsetto. "Oh! oh! oh! I thought I had it, but I lost it!" And he would look roguishly over his shoulder to see if he were being heard and appreciated.

But stretching a pair of shoes was always the true climax of his day. As he thrust the stretcher in under the protesting vamp, screwing it tight so that it spread the leather to the snapping point and banging the distended shoe on the wrapping counter, he would cry at the top of his mad voice, "Take it out, daddy, it hoi-oi-oits!" Then, twirling the shoe frantically until it fell from the shrunken stretcher, moan in sudden regret, "Oh, put it back, daddy, I lo-o-o-ove it!"

Meanwhile the customers would swirl around him, listening in astonishment or pretending to ignore him. Sometimes he would whirl abruptly, catch some petrified girl staring at him incredulously, and "Dog!" he would scream, "Spy! What are you looking at? From Montclair you had to come to watch me! When you start with me you start with the wrong one."

Yet he was never bawled out by Mr. Z., who hounded me every minute of the living day—for too many lost sales, for unshined shoes, for being myself. Abie, you must realize, made more sales than any two men in the store. "Naturally," Mr. Z. would explain, "he thinks like them. He understands their Psychology." And later he would add, glancing at me coldly, "Better than some geniuses who study it in school."

Often Abie would drag an unsuspecting customer into his act. He preferred for stooges large Negresses, who would roll their eyes shyly; middle-aged matrons with foreign accents; or the very old, the half-deaf, the obviously genteel. But in a pinch anyone would do. "Let me tell you, lady," he would begin in the special tone that indicated "fun," while the rest of us began to

gather around his section on pretended errands, "this is the assblaster model—ASSBLASTER!" He would pause dramatically to shake a wire brush for cleaning suede shoes under the nose of his victim, at the same time smiling up at her his blandest smile. "Good for the hair around the hole."

And if, not believing her ears, the customer were foolish enough to ask what he had said, he would half rise from his stool, one hand on each fat thigh, his face thrust so close to his victim that she could feel the spittle from his purple lips on her cheek. *Dog! I said it's good for the hair around the HOLE!*" He would scream the words at her in pretended rage, then patiently repeat them over and over as if to an idiot or a child. Finally, he would dissolve into silent laughter, trembling with joy on his stool; and turning to us quickly, stick out his tongue in an infantile gesture of satisfaction with himself and contempt for the whole female world. Yet there were customers who would allow themselves to be waited on by no one but the "funny man," and who would begin to giggle in anticipation as they sat down. "False," Abie would say, settling down on his stool, "at what are you laughing already? Who died?"

And then, Christmas Eve—my first Christmas in the store. The feather-fringed mules on the special gift table were reduced to three or four soiled mismates, and we had finished tightening up the stock to make room for the gold and silver evening slippers to dance in the New Year. We closed early that night, I remember, a few minutes before six, though it was a Saturday; and Mr. Z. himself chased out the final customer without a pair of shoes. It was unheard of, to let a *schlager* walk out without a sale, but as Mr. Z. reminded us, "Christmas comes but once a year."

Though only twelve or thirteen of the crew had remained, he had set out six bottles on top of the water cooler. It was his treat, not only the whisky but also the corned beef and potato salad which no one ate; and he had draped himself in a piece of red cloth to suit the occasion, pasted on a false beard made of the absorbent cotton we used for swabs in dyeing shoes. With his stomach, his extra chin and his habit of false joviality, he made

a convincing enough Santa Claus; and betrayed by his role into real affection, he even put an arm around me for the first time. "Herman," he said, "you're a fine boy. Now get the hell out of here. Merry Christmas." And Abie, who stood next to him, his eyes half-closed and his hands folded over his belly, nodded in confirmation. "Go home to your mama. With such dogs you don't have to stay after business."

Meanwhile, George, the porter, had pulled down the shade on the front door and locked all the windows in the back room, slowly, carefully, as if it were an ordinary night. He was a cautious man and he liked me; but he, too, warned me, wagging his solemn head, "Boy, you go home. This ain't gonna be for you." After so much advice, I had no choice. I had to stay.

It was to be a quick party—that was understood. At eight o'clock, everyone would be gone: to other parties, to trim Christmas trees, to finish getting drunk at a bar, it didn't matter—only the fact that it must be over at eight, that it must be *quick!* Mr. Z. teed off with a little speech beginning, "I'm no good at speeches," and ending "Merry Christmas." But before he was finished, he had downed his first paper cup full of whisky and the others had followed his cue. There was not much of a middle to his remarks, something about all of us becoming one big happy family; but his own sentiments brought tears to his eyes, and all the others nodded approvingly, even Abie whose eyes were mere slits now and whose lips were pursed as if he were about to whistle. But as the group dissolved, one of the salesmen called Max, a man with whom I had never exchanged more than three words, whispered into my ear, "Don't think I believe this shit."

Then Mr. Z. noticed me again and said, "Herman, you're too young. Go home!" He had opened his vest, his collar, loosened his belt, as if the expansion of his spirits demanded an equal expansion of the flesh. "You tell him, Abie," he added, as I stood there undecided. "He's your pal." At the word "pal," Max snickered and, flushing, I went into the back room to put on my overcoat, stopping only long enough to shout at the bottles of shoe dye, "My name's Hyman, not Herman."

When I came out, everyone began to yell at me, "Herman, go

home!" laughing as if it were the greatest of jokes; but Max, who was drunker than the rest (he was always half-drunk), put an arm around me, whispering, "You stay, kid, we'll show these boozhwahzee bastards." The word bourgeoisie seemed unlikely enough in the mouth of Max, whom I had known only as the most dapper and insolent of the salesmen. He was a small man, scarcely taller than me at fourteen, with thickly pomaded hair and a sly little mustache, and drunk or sober, he was most weeks second only to Peckelis in "production." He had never spoken to me before except mockingly, but now he leaned toward me earnestly. "Stay for the laughs, kid, this'll educate you. You've never seen anything like these jibeebees outside a zoo."

And so I stayed, sweating inside my overcoat beside the water cooler and the wastebasket full of crumpled paper cups. At first everyone was cutting the liquor with a little water; and as they came to the cooler one by one, I would note how their hands grew more unsteady, their greetings to me heartier and heartier. "You still here, shorty?" they would ask in mock surprise. "Go home. Don't you want to see Santy Claus?" Or later, still pretending, you understand, but not having to try too hard, "Christ, kid, where'd you get the brother? Both of you go home!" But after a while, they skipped the water, and I was forgotten.

I could scarcely believe the speed with which the whisky disappeared, the urgency with which they plunged toward drunkenness. What were they after? What did they want? It was oppressively hot, I remember, the heat dazzling in the bright, empty store, but I did not think of taking off my overcoat, only stared and listened. The silence of it all was a special puzzle to me. They scarcely spoke to each other, just drank; though occasionally two or three of them would join their voices in a carol, or a girl scream when old Greenie pinched her butt.

Greenie was the first to collapse (altogether that evening six passed out cold), the oldest man in the store, for eleven weeks running low man in findings, buckles, opera pumps and hosiery sales. It was clear to everyone that he would be fired inside of a month or two. The store was too fast for his old legs, the stock too hard for his weak back; and though he would sing bravely,

when the younger men teased him about his potency, "It takes the old man a little longer, but he gets there just the same . . ." he did not really care any more.

His only remaining passion was a nostalgia for strength and beauty; with the same abstract, reverent air, he would pinch a girl's ass or feel the arm of some embarrassed, husky youngster. "What an arm," he would say, shaking his head ruefully, "like my leg!" and he would pluck some passing salesman by the sleeve to be his witness. "Look," he would insist, first pulling the pants leg tight around his own withered thigh, then attempting to span the biceps of the boy, "with both my hands I can't get around it—like my leg!" Max and I carried him, limp and almost weightless, to the back of the store, arranging him neatly behind the last row of seats.

"I used to work for an undertaker once," Max told me. "You don't believe me?"

"I believe you."

"Laid out many a stiff."

I took off Greenie's glasses and put them in his pocket. Wearing glasses myself, I realize how hard it is when they are broken. Greenie's eyes, naked and shadowed, were like black holes in his skull.

At this point, they began offering me drinks, the hose girls first of all. "Try a little sip, kiddo, it won't hurt you. Nobody ever died from it!" I would pretend to drink and, "Good boy," they would say with apparent relief. "You're no genius!"

By the time the cop entered, the hose girls had left on the arms of three indistinguishable gents, in black overcoats with velvet collars, who at five-minute intervals had rattled the locked front door until I let them in. They had each refused a drink, grunted something that might have been "Merry Christmas" though you could not have proved it against them in court, and had disappeared with the girls. Only the cashier, four salesman (including Abie and Max), the manager and I were still there and conscious. Max and I luggered two other bodies to what he kept calling "Shadyrest." Max was still walking fairly well, though his end of

the stiffs dragged lower and lower, and he insisted on sprinkling each one of them with "embalming fluid" out of a gin bottle.

Not much liquor was going down anyone's throat any more, though the motions of drinking continued. I could see the whisky slosh, as if of its own accord, over shirts and down the front of dresses. I should say, I suppose, dress—singular—since the cashier was the only remaining woman. Ordinarily a reserved and unfriendly girl (everyone suspected her of being an anti-Semite, for she came from a fashionable suburb), she kept trying to sit on the manager's scarcely existent lap and ending up on the floor.

I opened the door for the cop, no one else by this time being willing to make the long trip to the front of the store, but I did not answer him when he asked hopefully, "What's going on in here?" At fourteen I was a regular reader of the *New Masses* and hated the police with a passion purer than any I have left.

"It's a raid!" Mr. Z. cried in pretended fright, letting the cashier slide to the floor again; and all at once, everyone was shouting, "Murphy, have a drink!" except for Max who whispered in my ear, "Damned Cossack!" I could not tell whether he was kidding.

In a few minutes they began to sing, "When Irish eyes are smiling . . ." and Abie, who had not even looked in my direction all evening, was rubbing up against Murphy's blue broadcloth like a cat. He had snatched the night stick away from the cop, and fondling it incredulously, kept repeating, "Oh, daddy, what a big one you got. Oh, daddy!" Though he had drunk nothing, his face had grown redder, his lips looser, his eyes more moist, and he was sweating with pleasure.

Murphy, knowing, by God, a good joke when he heard one, roared with delight, nearly choking on his drink in the process. Blowing and snorting, he wiped his mouth with the back of one hairy hand and jabbed Abie in the ribs with the other. "Ah, go on with yez," he shouted playfully (I swear to you that was what he said—what can I do!) at Abie picking himself off the floor and brushing the seat of his pants tenderly. "Oh, be careful, daddy," Abie said. "Don't break it, daddy." Then, so quickly I could not

be sure it was aimed at me at all, he sent a wink in my direction, mouthing soundless curses in Yiddish as he put one arm around the cop.

A little later they were dancing together, Murphy's thick arm around Abie's shoulder, Abie's oiled head resting blissfully on the cop's chest, as the others stood around in a circle, clapping and stamping in time to the tune of "O*i, oi, oi, oi, mazeltov!*" a song of rejoicing sung at Jewish weddings. Even the presumably anti-Semitic cashier was beating time on the top of Mr. Z.'s bald head, while George the porter, who had suddenly appeared from God knows where, danced slowly in place beside her.

I still stood apart from the rest, a witness beside the water cooler, when Max joined me again. "Feeling pretty *superior*, ain't you, snotnose. Su-per-i-or, that's a fancy word for a shoe-dog."

"No, look—really—I—"

"You think I'm like these other ignorant jimmokes—stupid—nothing but a god-damned shoe-dog."

"I never—"

"Just a stupid shoe-dog, is that it?"

"Really, I—"

"Shut up! I know what you think. Think you're a radical, don't you, a radical."

I had never talked politics in the store that I could recall, but I would not deny it. "Yes, I—"

He made a meaningless gesture. "Oh, you know the score all right! We're just wage slaves, white-collared, yellowbellied boozhwahzees. Ain't that right, Comrade Genius?"

"You don't know what you're—"

"How old are you?"

"That don't make any—"

"Shut up!"

That was easy, because I had never really said anything; so I just looked at him, while he tried to stare me down. Finally, I turned my eyes away in weariness. I could see it pleased him; he thought he had proved something, God knows what.

"Listen," he said, grabbing me by the lapels of the overcoat

(it was too big for me, a hand-me-down from my father, with large checks—"the horse-blanket," the kids in school called it), "listen. I was a union man once. You don't know a god-damn thing about—I suppose you read *Das Kapital*—"

I nodded.

"Christ, I read it before I was—" He stopped suddenly as if he had read something offensive in my glance. "You don't believe me?"

"I believe you."

"Ask John Harwood, Bella Biemoller. Ask Bill Smantz." Who were they? Where had the meaningless names come from? "Everybody knows—"

"I said I believe you!"

"Well, *sound* it! I was even a Yipsel. You know what that is, Comrade Genius?"

"Sure," I said. "Young People's Socialist League."

"That's right—Socialist. There were some pretty sharp youngsters in that outfit. You wouldn't know a guy by the name of—Jesus, no, you were working full-time filling your diapers then!"

"Well, then, why do you—why don't you *do* something, if you know so much, understand the principles of the class struggle. First of all, what you guys need is a union. Now I can get in contact with a representative of—" Class struggle! You see how it was. A minute before I had been bewildered, afraid, then suddenly—

"You talk about a union," Max said. "I was a business agent once for the undertakers' union. You think that's crap, don't you?"

"Look, if only—"

"A union man! Not like the rest of them, stupid, yellow boozhwahzees." He pointed toward Greenie, snoring slightly between the other two semi-corpse. "I was once a Yipsel."

"You said that," I told him. "Look, if we can get together with one or two others, even one other salesman, any night next week, I know a guy who—" Already in my mind the store was organized, and I was walking up and down on the picket line carrying a sign: UNFAIR TO—

"I used to be a union man myself—a Yipsel. You don't even

know what the hell that is." He walked over to a mirror, standing up to it in the old-fashioned socialist salute, the arm extended up and out, the fist clenched. I stood up behind him, watching his face over his shoulder, trying to see it as he saw it: the patchy beard, the pimples, the hair streaked with gray under its shell of pomade; but the face still of one who had been a Yipsel and a union man. Softly he began to sing to the tune of "Maryland, My Maryland," "The workers' flag is deepest red—The workers'—" He could not get past the first line, and he turned to me for help. "I don't remember. For Christ's sake, I don't remember any more!"

I knew only one more line myself, but I sang it: "It shrouded o'er our martyred dead," and together we sang the two lines over and over, climbing up on to seats and down again in time to the song, back and forth the entire length of the store. "The workers' flag is deepest red—it shrouded o'er our martyred dead."

The cop, still dancing with Peckelis, the boss, still beating his hands together and singing in parody, "Oi, oi, oi, oi, mazeltov—the Rabbi has the whooping cough," paid us no heed. Still we had the sense of shouting our defiance in the very teeth of our oppressors: Mr. Z.'s belly sagging between the open flaps of his vest, Murphy's brutal jaw—like a cartoon in the *New Masses*.

I felt a special revulsion toward Abie, squirming in the arms of a dumb cop and insulting him in Yiddish under his breath to make the others laugh. "That god-damn fairy!" I said to Max as we paused for a moment. "I hate his—"

But even as I spoke, Max tripped and fell. He rose again quickly; but breathless and excessively pale, was barely able to make it to a seat. "Gimme a minute, kid, just a minute." His mouth was open and he held his hand to his heart like an old man. I could hardly bear to look at him. As I turned away in disgust, I realized that not only our own singing had stopped; the rest of the group still stood in a ring around Abie and the policeman, but they were not even laughing any more. I pushed my way curiously between the cashier and George, my head thrust forward like a turtle's out of the shell of my foolish overcoat.

Finally I could see the cop with one arm still around Abie, though they were no longer dancing. He was goosing him with his night stick and Abie was making small squeals of pleasure, scarcely distinguishable from the noise of his quick, heavy breathing. His eyes under the half-closed lids were moist and dim; and his tongue, fat and foam-flecked, was going round and round, at the same time darting in and out of his open mouth.

I was fascinated by the erratic motion of the tongue, jerking crazily out of phase with his own breathing, as if moved by a will of its own, faster, faster, *faster*—Suddenly it stopped, and Peckelis' body, bent like a bow until a moment before, went limp. The cop, releasing his arm, let him drop with a thump to the floor and, standing over him, began to laugh, a huge contagious bellow that the others picked up, each in his own variation until the store echoed with laughter, billow on billow as if it would never stop. As Abie looked for a moment directly at me, I could read the Yiddish curses I could not hear: “May he swell up—may he be hanged; may he burn like a candle. . . .”

Things happened too fast from that point on. An instant later, George the porter had fallen over the railing into the basement below—breaking his leg, it was discovered much later, although at first no one would go down to look. “It’s only a gag,” Mr. Z. insisted. “All these jigs are first-class athletes—hard as nails.” And when I kept protesting, he snapped impatiently, “Go down and look yourself if you’re so worried.”

But I did not go down, though George was my friend and would sit with me at lunchtime among the bales of old shoeboxes and the dusty china legs in the basement. It was pitch dark below and I feared the rats whom I could feel in my imagination nuzzling my ankles before I got the lights turned on. I could almost see them, fat and furry, sniffing at the pool of blood in which George lay—perhaps dying or dead.

I thought I had found an ally, when a few minutes later I saw the cashier leaning over the bannister above the cellar steps, as if peering into the darkness to see what had happened. But she was only puking into the shaft; and when I tried to draw her away, to tell her about George lying helpless below, she drew me to her

damp, sour-smelling breast. "You're a fine boy—and you can call me Emma Jane. God bless you and a Merry Christmas to you and your family." She almost shouted the words, and suddenly everyone was repeating them. "God bless you and a Merry Christmas to you and your family," they cried to one another, exchanging kisses with sudden affection.

Only Peckelis did not join in, leaning against the wall now exhausted, and wiping first his forehead then his upper lip carefully with a large white handkerchief. I could imagine its sickly scent. "Christ is risen!" Emma Jane screamed. "Or is that Easter?" and she rushed back to the railing in a new spasm of nausea.

Even Max is better than this, I thought despondently; but I found him weeping in his chair, his head slumped forward until it almost rested on his knees. In his hands, he held a brown paper bag. "It's a baby doll," he explained, "for my little girl. For Christmas." He lifted the doll out, gold and pink and white, but it slipped through his clumsy fingers, fell to the floor at his feet. He was on his knees in an instant, scrambling to retrieve it, half-blind with tears.

I picked it up for him. "Look," I said, poking its belly so that it bleated maa-maa. "It's not even broken."

He snatched it from me in sudden anger. "You think I'm soft—a god-damn, no-good, sentimental boozhwahzee, don't you?" He was yelling at the top of his voice. "Nothing but a boozhwahzee."

"Listen," I said, "for Christ's sake."

"I'll show you who's a boozhwahzee! I used to be a Yipsel." He held the doll high over his head, standing as erect as he could manage, his legs straddled wide, though he listed dangerously. His fly was open. "Don't think this Christmas malarkey fools me one little minute. It's a boozhwahzee holiday!"

"Take it easy, you're drunk!" What did I know, a kid in a checked overcoat?

"I'll show you who's drunk!" He threw the doll to the ground, stamped on it, grinding the head to powder under his heel. "That proves it," he sobbed, "that proves it, God damn it, *don't* it?" But he passed out before making it clear just what he thought it proved.

I dragged him to the back of the store and laid him beside the others. As I tossed the crippled remains of the doll down beside him, he spoke without opening his eyes. His voice was low but surprisingly distinct. "Don't think harshly of me, kid," he said—a line from an old-fashioned melodrama. "Don't think harshly of me." But I was already on my way out.

And so in a way, I have got down the story, after all, though I have not had a moment's peace. As I have written, the phone has rung three times: the plumber, the landlord, the florist. What they asked I do not really know, answering them: yes, yes, yes—thank you—good-by. I do not believe in them, any more than in the Grand Opening tomorrow. If there are tears in my eyes, they are not for Hyman Brandler who is not a writer, who is thirty-five. I am fourteen again, and once more it is Christmas Eve.

I leave before the party is quite over, without looking back over my shoulder at Max, without daring to meet the eye of Abie, who is sitting now staring at the floor between his legs. I have forgotten George the porter, and no one cries "Merry Christmas" to my back; only Mr. Z. mutters thickly something about, "Go home!"

As I push open the front door, the carillon from the Public Service Building is playing "Silent Night, Holy Night" and the crowd at the trolley stop stamps in time to keep warm; their breaths are visible as they shout greetings and jocular insults to each other. Before my streetcar comes, Abie Peckelis thrusts past me, almost knocking me over.

I turn away from him, stare into the unlit display window, hoping he has not recognized me, afraid to be embarrassed before the holiday crowd. But he seems to pay no attention to me. "Dogs!" he screams back over his shoulder, shaking his fist at the group still left in the store. "Four walls! Diamonds isn't everything!" The people at the curb turn to watch him, grinning and nudging each other; and I grin with them.

He looks around him frantically, but the boy he was perhaps afraid had gone is still waiting, and coming out of the shadows, he links his arm with Abie's, looking down at him in dispassionate

contempt. The boy is dark and heavily muscled but light on his feet, a boxer or professional golfer, and Peckelis snuggles close, patting his hair nervously into place. He has somehow the air of one resolving this time to be true.

Though he has not even glanced in my direction, and I huddle inside the shelter of my coat, my nose pressed to the glass, he has spotted me; and while the crowd listens in sudden silence, he turns toward me for a parting shot, screaming in unreasonable fury, "Dog! Don't try to hide. I know you already. False! You're like all the rest—*false!*"

"What a nut!" someone says out of the crowd and I smile smugly to myself at the nuttiness of Abie Peckelis—I who at fourteen believe I have never betrayed anything, and know that I never will.

Pull Down Vanity!

Actually, I admire Edward Fenton greatly—even though he is a literary critic; and yet for a long time I have wished him dead. Which does not quite explain, of course, why in the beginning I should have claimed to have seven children, and why in the end I lay beside Judith Somers limp and without love; but it is, at least, a way to start—and for me that is always the most difficult thing of all.

For over twenty years Edward Fenton has been dying—dying, we have got used to saying, young—though he is by now nearing sixty and the shadow of his death has hung over all of us since we can remember, an absurdly disproportionate threat that has come finally to seem a critical event (precisely because it does not happen) in the history of our recent literature. What young writer has not received, immediately after his first publication, one of those familiar appeals through the mail from some *ad hoc* committee to support Edward Fenton; and who has not read Fenton's

own scandalously inept verses (awarded a prize by *Poetry* last year—for purely sentimental reasons) on his treacherous heart and his much-advertised five children.

Nearly three years ago, I completed my own definitive essay on Fenton, which I call “Edward Lear as T. S. Eliot,” and which can only appear after his death. Certainly, while he is living I would do nothing that might seem an attempt to curry favor with the man who described my second book of poems, *Defeats and Empathies* (he had ignored the first completely), as “limp, hypothyroid, excruciatingly well-behaved.” I am unaffected by personal spite, so you will understand how objectively I am able to say (my essay is good—I know it!) that I can scarcely wait for Fenton to die. What else is there for the author of “Ronald Firbank, a Female Jane Austen” and “Tennyson After Dachau” to do!

At any rate, I had not expected to meet Fenton at Darlington College, when I agreed to take part in their Writers’ Conference. I do not accuse the planners of the conference of fraud in this regard, for they could surely not be expected to know my complicated feelings about the man; and they must have mentioned his name (proudly, I suppose) in one of those long, chatty letters which they kept sending me before the Conference, and which, naturally enough, I never opened. In any case, I would have had to go—finding in the prospect of living at close quarters with Fenton for nearly two weeks only one more misery to add to those “laboratory sessions” I had agreed to hold with the full coven of southern Missouri poets. And this, too, in mid-July! I could foresee it all, the withered ladies in their backless dresses, the requests for autographs, and, final indignity, the query as to what I thought of Ezra Pound!

I am not brave—only frantically, shyly aggressive—but I needed money badly; and so I had felt obliged to make a public appearance for the first time in my life as a writer. Ever since I fled from New York in 1936, I have been teaching literature at that combination dude ranch and prep school in southern Texas, once known only to the parents of wealthy delinquents eager to enter Harvard, but now familiar to the half-million readers of my ex-wife’s discouragingly successful novel, *Love Among the Cactus*.

The scene in which the wife of an English instructor (guess who?) and her fifteen-year-old lover tenderly pick cactus spines out of each other's rear ends has by this time become a standard item in the repertory of radio comedians and night-club entertainers; but when I arrived in Darlington, the book had not yet appeared. It had, however, already been accepted by a publisher, whose hysterical letters of praise had helped my wife make up her mind, after fourteen years of threats and feints, finally to leave me; though, indeed, it was I who had encouraged her in the first place to submit for publication her mindless manuscript.

At any rate, our divorce proceedings were about to begin, and I was just becoming aware of the expenses involved. But all this, you must realize, was still completely unknown; though I suppose it is hard to believe now that our case has been exploited by every newspaper in the land in order to vent that hatred of literature which is planted deeper in the American heart than any other sentiment except the belief in the virtue of seeing your dentist twice a year. I, who am now a byword like Peaches Browning's Daddy or the kidnaper of the Lindbergh baby, was then something of a mystery, for I had never even shared in the cannibalism of New York literary life, and the few facts available about me from my own poems (I had been a tail gunner in a B-29; I played tournament golf; I had learned to break horses) were probably not believed.

Certainly, Chuck Bligh had been glad to see me, pleased and a little incredulous as he came forward to shake my hand; and I had remembered that he was not only the organizer of the Conference, but also that "poet of the Ozarks" whose works I had described in one of my justly admired omnibus reviews in *Kenyon Review* as "the sort of verse which might have been composed by a retarded but diligent child of eleven whose only model was a parody of Keats by Louis Untermeyer." If he recalled this at all (and who, having read it, could ever forget), it did not show.

"Well, well, Milton," he said, pretending not to notice my grimace as he scurried to pump my hand, pat me on the back, and push up a chair behind me all at once. "Well, well—"

"It depresses me to be called by my first name," I told him, as

indeed it does—reminding me at once of my obligations to the Muse (“that one talent which is death to hide”) and of my foolish mother. The boys at school call me in friendly mockery “Tex”; and in the Air Corps I was, incredibly enough, called seriously by that nickname; to myself I am simply Amsterdam. “And when I get depressed, I review the poetry of my friends.”

“Very good. Very good, Amsterdam. I told Ed Fenton here that you’d answered none of my letters after the first, and Ed”—he kept emphasizing the “Ed” like a reproach—“has been saying you’d never come. Didn’t you, Ed?”

I turned to look in the direction indicated by Bligh’s limp hand—and there was Fenton perched on the edge of a desk, grinning at me with unexpectedly robust malice. “Didn’t think you’d dare face the Old Master in person, Milton. I’ve been telling little Judy”—he reached over to pat the cheek of Bligh’s secretary, scarlet with embarrassment and pride at being part of so distinguished a group—“that you’d crap out for sure. You’re certainly prettier than I expected, though. Christ, you’re prettier than the young Edna Millay—although she wasn’t Jewish at all, was she?” He looked around as if for an answer; and bending over toward the secretary, who was mumbling something confused, almost pushed his nose into the crease between her pale, flagrant breasts. Even in my annoyance at my dumbness before Fenton (why did he talk like that? so differently from the involuted, sly style of his essays!), I could not help feeling how attractive she was—her extraordinarily fair skin not white but silver, dusted over with a barely visible fuzz of golden hair, and those plump breasts so perilously constrained by the low-cut summer dress. I could scarcely keep from touching her.

“Judy says Edna was Irish, Milton,” he informed me gravely. “She’s a bright girl, our Judith—not the mere office slavey she seems. She’s working for a degree in philosophy—and she writes poetry, too.” He kept staring at the girl, who squirmed satisfactorily under his glance. “You may be interested to learn that her favorite poet is Milton Amsterdam—and quite right, too. Don’t you think he’s pretty, Judith?”

Nobody said anything to interrupt this malicious monologue,

Judith looking down over the plumpness of her flesh at her large soft hands, Bligh watching me with open pleasure at my discomfiture, and I unable to break through Fenton's bantering attack. Fenton's mere appearance had surprised and distressed me—the animal healthiness of the presumably dying man behind the ragged musketeer's beard that made him look so different from the clean-shaven, tough, pathetic youth of the unchanging portrait on his book jackets. He was wearing a pair of outrageously dirty seersucker pants, too long for his bandy legs, and a tight green sport shirt open far enough to reveal the mat of dirty gray hair on his chest.

"Come now, come now! You *do* think he's pretty, don't you? Let's not be shy, baby!"

"I like him," she managed to say in a muted, pleasantly raucous voice. She did not look at me.

"She likes you, boy. Don't you think he looks like Truman Capote—something soft and charmingly rotten—gothic—"

"Oh, no!" she protested; and I did not trouble to add my own demurrer, the comparison was so mischievously pointless. My wife, in our happier moments, used to tell me that I resembled the actor John Garfield—a comparison I have never particularly relished, but one whose justice I have to recognize. "An East Side Truman Capote—" Fenton persisted; and as I made my first effort to speak, he rose and walked over to me, clasping me about the shoulders in a sudden show of affection. "Milton, I've been meaning to write to you for months. I like your newer stuff—that curtail sonnet of yours, 'The Plangence of the Beloved'—it's the best short poem since Emily Dickinson!"

"I don't even know what a curtail sonnet is," I managed to say, thinking that he had probably made up the term to annoy me; but I regretted immediately my awkward protest.

"Don't be churlish, boy! We all love you." He drew me to him, breathing his old, thin, whisky-soured breath into my face, and pulling Judith up with the other arm to complete a symbolic group. "We all love each other—we Chosen People. No *goyim* here. I speak spiritually, of course."

I was too exasperated by then even to wonder if his compulsive

anti-Semitism were real or merely a device to betray me into anger; and anyhow Judith was leaning forward across his chest, looking at me for the first time. Her eyes were astonishingly dark under the pallid high forehead, the silver blond hair woven into two thick braids; a furry wet black, as if she were at the point of weeping, or had just reopened them after some splendid climax of desire.

"I wouldn't have known you were Jewish—I mean, not from your looks," she said indistinctly, disengaging herself from Fenton; but she blushed as she said it, and when I did not answer, added, "Excuse me!"

Meanwhile, however, Chuck Bligh had introduced himself between Fenton and me, laying a palm on each of our shoulders, and crying out with obvious satisfaction, "But just wait till you meet the others—There's Miss Manfred, she's Commercial Fiction—and Fleetwood Demby, the novelist, you'll like *him!* I can't tell you what it means to hear some real intellectual talk again after the cultural fast of the winter. Real Talk! We must have some more! After a day with the old biddies, sweating over hot poetry and criticism all day"—he laughed wearily at his own joke—"we can relax over a glass of beer, let down our hair."

"I don't drink beer," I said.

"And I"—Fenton winked broadly at all of us—"consider it a more important part of my duties to relax with some of the younger writers after the formal sessions. Malt does more than Milton can—" He walked to the desk where Judith had sat down again before a typewriter, leaning forward until his mean, greenish eyes were on a level with hers. She laid one hand, a little awkward and too large, over the exposed part of her breast, as if to shield it. "I made my attitude on this point clear in one of my letters to you, Bligh."

"Naturally, naturally," Bligh answered. "And now for the forms —no America without wood pulp, you know." With considerable show of despising what he did, he fell to the administrative detail, the business of forms and signatures, that he obviously really enjoyed. And it was then that I made my absurd and pointless claim.

I suppose it was Judith's conventional exclamation of wonder when Fenton announced the number of his children which did the mischief. "Five!" she had said, drawing down the corners of her odd mouth, at once old-fashionedly innocent and wicked, like something out of Rossetti or Swinburne. "Five! Well I never!"

I felt, or imagined I could feel her moved dimly, sexually by such evidence of potency, and I said, "I have seven."

"Seven what?" Fenton asked, as everyone laughed. "Persian cats?" Now, oddly enough, the only living thing over whose custody my wife and I fought on parting was a Siamese cat of which she is obscenely fond. My own feeling about animals is rather like my attitude toward children, which is to say, a sense of manfully controlled nausea; and I had made trouble over the beast for the trouble's sake. But at that instant, among the tax blanks, I found myself wishing with all the passion of a child longing for a treat he has scornfully rejected for reasons he can no longer remember, that I had had children—many of them! "No, really, seven children. 'Seven infant darlings of a pigmy size.' I try to keep it dark—it's a little embarrassing."

I produced from my wallet the picture I had taken last year, standing with my sister, Mae, in the midst of her (really) seven kids. It is all doctrinal with Mae; when she was still a Communist (it was she who had talked me into joining briefly in '36, and I have never forgiven her), she had four or five husbands and no children; but now, having recognized the values of bourgeois life, she is living in Kansas City and spawning at an alarming rate while finishing a long study intended to prove the wisdom of John Quincy Adams's rebuttal of Tom Paine. "Seven. 'Seven lillies in one garland wrought!'"

Judith, who had taken the photograph in hand, sighing, moved over to the window. "Seven! How cute they are! What are they called?"

"I'm afraid it would just bore you."

"No, really." And when I kept stubbornly silent, "I have just one of my own—a girl named Susan who's only eleven months old, but people take her for at least a year and a half, she's so

big!" I felt a sudden pang at learning that she was married and a mother; though I could not have said precisely why, I had the sense of having been somehow deceived.

"And your wife," Judith went on nervously, "I would have guessed she would look like that. Wouldn't you have just known it, Chuck? She's so pretty!" She said it smugly, out of the security of her own superior beauty, but without malice—in simple condescension.

Mae is, of course, anything but good-looking, though there is something warm and thickly sensual about her that appeals especially to gentiles. My former wife, Eileen, on the other hand, is a real *shiksa*, with the kind of bloodless, nervous charm to which I had fled once as another aspect of that anti-New York America, that utopia of non-Jewishness defined by rodeos and ranch-type houses with picture windows. But all this you will doubtless understand if you have read my long poem in dactyls, "Passover in Santa Fe."

"Seven children! I never thought you had it in you. Congratulations, boy." Fenton shook his head doubtfully, looking from my gum-soled pale blue tennis shoes, up the precise crease of my linen pants to the dandyish cowboy shirt with the discreetly embroidered yoke. I could see he despised me for refusing to look like the writers of his generation, to whom their sloppy rags had seemed the uniform of a disorder they called freedom. "You must be very happily married."

"I am," I answered, trying to ignore the wink which he directed over my shoulder to Judith. "I am!"

Judith, meanwhile, had pretended to busy herself at the filing cabinet near the door, and lifting her head only a little as we passed her on the way out, she whispered to me, "I hate him, too!"

Her hands were too big, her waist too thick, and her mouth merely petulant, I told myself; and she was stupid, hopelessly stupid, with her coos of admiration over my supposed family. But I knew that she was the most beautiful girl I had ever met, and I was annoyed at wanting her for so banal a reason. How sure I had been during the weeks before that I was tired of women

forever, their ambitions and exactions, their softness and darkness—the whole expensive enterprise of pursuing and possessing them.

The Conference turned out to be almost precisely what I had expected—and yet in the end, unforeseen, unforeseeable. The clean, odorless old ladies who had turned to poetry after the deaths of their husbands and the marriage of their children were overwhelmingly there, scarcely perspiring in the intolerable heat that made the sweat roll down into my eyes as I stood before them. But though I had known exactly the kind of verse they would write, I had not known how abjectly they would welcome my bitter remarks on their ineptness; now innocently they would laugh at each other's discomfiture; or how, coming to me after a session's end, they would confess their ignorance and misguided taste in an almost voluptuous surrender. Their eyes would shine as they watched my nervous movements perched on the corner of a desk; and meeting me by the Coke machine in the corridor, they would ask timidly if it were really true that I had seven children; then turning to each other, would say back and forth, "Seven! Would you believe it! How young he is, how young!"

To be so loved and admired was for me an almost unbearable shame. I could not help feeling that I was profiting somehow by an elaborate hoax; that not only my seven children, but the whole self they saw was an illusion, a sham. My mother had always hated me for reasons I could never fathom, and during my adolescence I had not been particularly successful with girls, while to my wife I had been only a second-hand approach to literary greatness, abandoned when her own book had been accepted. Whatever she had once said to me in flattery or tenderness, she had specifically disclaimed in our last days together.

But that summer I could hear from all sides the whispers intended to be overheard on my seven children, my beauty and my wit. At my least quip, the room of fifty or sixty "writers," almost all women, would rock with disproportionate laughter; and the simplest exegesis of the most obvious line was received with the startled sighs of a revelation. After a while, I even began to believe (I admit it without shame—you know the cruel, half-true

things a woman tells a man she is about to divorce; and I *needed* consolation) that perhaps I had all along been as witty, charming and mythically potent as these miserable women had to believe.

Behind it all, there was Judith Somers, a kind of *agent provocateur*, who would cue and sustain the hum of admiration with a whispered comment, a sigh or simple look, coming breathless into class every day between her two jobs as waitress and part-time secretary to Chuck Bligh. Edging down the side of the room to the back row after I had already begun to talk, she would keep her eyes on me in such frank adoration that I could scarcely help writhing in pride, embarrassment and rage. The others seemed sometimes no more than projections of her: the palsied woman with the knot of gray hair who would touch me compulsively as she talked; the young widow who brought with her each day her eight-year-old daughter for whom she could find no baby-sitter; the little girl herself who would gaze up at me, uncomprehending and round-eyed but held by the common enchantment, as she gravely cut out an endless series of paper dolls; even Sister Magdalena, the nun, who would raise to me from time to time a face so rosy and pure and entranced under the black coif with its frill of white that I would be sure this was really a moving picture, after all, cast brutally or sentimentally to type.

After class my poets would follow me to the dormitory room where I held my conferences, wait patiently in the corridor, chattering excitedly in groups of three or four, until the moment when they could sit and watch me across the littered desk and beside the neatly made bed. There would always be a "problem" to begin with, a question of metrics or vocabulary, then some banal confidence, and, at last, the moment of silence in which they would gaze at me with the flattering tenderness that I despised myself for enjoying. In these intervals of quiet I would sometimes hear from next door the creaking of the floor, or the rustling of cloth against wood, and I would know that Fenton, who was my neighbor, was listening at the connecting door.

It was my relationship with Sister Magdalena that seemed to annoy him more than anything else, touching the heart of the anti-religious passion that had been so important for intellectuals

when he was young, and that had come to seem anachronistic as *vers libre* or companionate marriage.

"Mr. Fenton just can't understand, you know. He's so *hostile* to the Church, though very, very intelligent. And really he's a kindly old man underneath it all, but—" Sister Magdalena would look at me so wide-eyed and pleased to be understood at last that I could never criticize any of her work properly.

"But I'm a Jew, after all!" I protested one day, when she had been insisting once again on my superior understanding. "'Of a lineage once abhorred, nor yet redeemed from scorn.'"

"But that's just it," she responded, her face pink with delight, "that's JUST IT!" And I was forced to realize that even this most problematical part of myself was involved in the charade.

It was that day that Ed Fenton finally broke in on us, making his deliberately unconvincing excuses with a crooked grin, as Sister Magdalena left in a scared flurry of black skirts. "The meeting of two great orthodoxies, eh?" he began in a loud voice, facing not me but the door through which the sister had scarcely passed. "Like the conjunction of the Mississippi and the Missouri. Ah, well, we pale Protestant infidels!" Then in a pretended whisper, "Listen, Milton, I've been working on a new idea, inspired by Sister Magdalena who looks so forgiving about everything I say. You know my method of reducing mythic unities to their physiological bases. How about this, now? Father, Son and the Holy Ghost based on the carnal trinity of piss, shit and jism. The Holy Ghost is love—*caritas* equals jism, that's easy enough; and the Father—knowledge, the excrement of experience. I'm having a little trouble with the Son, but it'll work out!"

He began to laugh suddenly, pleased at my visible embarrassment. Yet it was for *him* that I was embarrassed, after all, at him trapped in his outmoded need to be tough and shocking. "O.K., Don Giovanni! I'll spare you the rest. Besides, I've got some work to do. We can't all live by charm alone—" He tried another laugh that didn't work, and shuffled off without waiting for my response. I should have sympathized with him, I know, but I was capable then only of feeling flattered because he was jealous of me and old and aware of being unloved.

He was constantly wooing the conferees, at first only the handful of younger poets, but later even the biddies themselves, to sit with him over a beer and be shocked by him a little in those unbreathable evenings that brought neither coolness nor the possibility of sleep. But somehow they would not come, or stared dully in their transparent boredom, so that finally he was driven back on the company of the staff: Chuck Bligh who listened to nothing in his undefined general pleasure in Good Conversation; Miss Manfred, who had come to teach the "commercial" short story, and who seemed at first simply mad, though it turned out that she was only acting frantically some provincial version of the flapper maintained for thirty years; and Fleetwood Demby, author of that sensitive first novel *Death's Other Kingdom*, whose purple eyes would watch Fenton with horror from behind his bangs.

I met all three one night just outside of the Campus Grille, Fenton apparently quite drunk and hanging for support between Demby and Miss Manfred. I tried not to see him, for I did not feel equal to his contempt, my head blurry as always when I emerged from the false paradise of the air-conditioning into the stifling night; and so I drew back into the group of young graduate students, assistants in English, philosophy and political science, with whom I had come to sit every night in the Campus Grille. We would argue literature or politics (most of them were, incredibly, Young Progressives!), the way it is possible to argue such matters when you are young, as if they finally mattered; and afterwards we would break up into smaller groups, still talking and talking in the heat that would not break. It was Judith who had asked me the first time; and her husband would stop by to call for me every evening—a tall, broad, silent boy, a little older than some of the others, with the sort of face one might expect to find in a tough working-class bar, though in his case subtilized by an unlooked-for pallor. He would scarcely talk to me, whether in shyness or resentment I could not at first tell; merely knock at the door and stand there, when I opened it, with his air of having come on someone else's errand, wait wordlessly until I joined him for the long walk to join the others.

But Fenton refused to let me slip by unchallenged; and after the obligatory exchange of hellos between the two groups, the students dropped back into the darkness, leaving me with the three neon-lighted others, who began talking at me all at once. I had the sense of one who moves back and forth through enemy lines.

"Is that oversize one Hank Somers?" Fenton asked in a thick conspiratorial voice, leaning forward so that his face almost touched mine, and his full weight was on the shoulders of his companions. "Our Judy's husband?"

"Please, darling, you're creasing my lapel," Demby protested.

"For Christ's sake, don't call me darling, it reminds me of my wife."

"Yes, darling, whatever you say." Demby lisped a little, in genteel spite.

"I think you're a darling, too," Miss Manfred cut in, making certain intendedly kittenish motions with her eyes and her hands, "an *old* darling." She laid considerable weight on the "old," though they were obviously nearly the same age. "Don't you think he's an old darling, Mr. Amsterdam?"

"He does *not*," Fenton said emphatically, "and neither do you, you old crow."

"Really!" Demby had cried, quite shocked, but trying to pat his wave into place nonchalantly.

"He's drunk, just drunk, you know," Miss Manfred assured him, "isn't he, Mr. Amsterdam?"

I didn't trouble to answer, and she went on, striking me a sharp blow just above the heart with two purple fingernails, "But you, Mr. Amsterdam, we've been hearing about you! You're a *legend* on this campus, a real legend—the Errol Flynn of the little magazines they call you—and all in five days, too. What do you *do* to all those girls? And you a father of eight children—or is it nine, Mr. Amsterdam?"

"He's awful big, boy," Fenton had gone on, ignoring her—as he pretended to peer into the dark at Hank, "awful big! Why don't you settle for a cold shower?" Impressed with his own wit, he began to chuckle. "A nice cold shower!"

The odd part of it all was that up until that point I had done nothing to justify the myth of myself as a Don Juan—nothing at all beyond my initial lie and my submission to an admiration I had not realized I was courting. Twice after our evenings of talk and beer, I had walked home with one girl or another who had wanted to be kissed by a poet, and I had kissed her, feeling an utter fool on that campus full of couples each recapitulating that childish embrace. It was as if I were reliving my youth, not the one, of course, that I had actually lived at City College in the years of the Depression, but a youth I might have had in another, a realer, a gentile America.

"He's a bouncer in the toughest joint in town, Milton. Maybe you played basketball at City College, son—but he'll . . ."

His voice trailed away incomprehensibly as Judith came toward us shyly out of the knot of students. I had never until that moment thought seriously of making her; her feeling for me had seemed too public and abstract to end in a real embrace: the feeling of a small girl for a movie actor or a handsome priest, an aspect of a legend. But as her shoulder brushed mine, actual flesh against flesh, I could feel desire mount in me, and for a moment I rested one hand gently on her ass.

She did not seem to notice, looking pointedly past me, as she talked to Fenton. "Mr. Fenton, we—Hank and I—were wondering if you could come over for supper day after tomorrow, about six or six-thirty. We've been thinking that you must be missing—well, home cooking and a house with children in it. We don't have five, but I can guarantee *one* little girl who will be up to greet you whatever we do. These—"

"He's drunk," I cut in, a little jealous and wondering whether that were not perhaps the whole point of the invitation. It irked me to have risen so stupidly to the bait.

"I may be drunk, but I know an invitation when I hear one. I'd be delighted, Mrs. Somers, delighted." He tried to leer, but his face kept collapsing around the effort. "As for the child, strangle it in its cradle, or ship it off to grandma's. My own five children, I'm proud to say, were all accidents—totally unwanted!"

He held up the fingers of one hand, apparently by way of illustration, and turned away.

"I'll remind him in the morning," I assured Judith later, when we had left Fenton sagging comfortably between his two friends. "I'm glad you invited him—he seems very lonely . . ." My voice sounded unconvincing even to me; but she did not appear to be listening.

Her silence seemed to cue the rest. Certainly, no one in the group had wanted to talk after I rejoined them, but whether in simple weariness or out of a sense that, after all, I was an intruder and a spy, I could not tell. Not even when I quoted once again the lines which had always amused them before, did they rise to speech.

Children of a future age,
Reading this indignant page,
Learn that in a former time
Love, sweet love was thought a crime!

Judith herself had only pressed closer into the crook of Hank's arm that cradled her. It was true that he was big; and his biceps bulged thick and sullen out of the tight sleeve of his T shirt.

It was only after the others had all left us, and I was saying good night to Hank and to her, that she spoke at last. I had already started to move off with a sense of disappointment that I resented but could not quell, when she came running up the steps of their basement apartment, out of the darkness where Hank still fumbled at the door.

"I just remembered that I may not have invited *you* yet—the same night for dinner, I mean. But I must have, surely. I must." She was obviously lying, though I could not tell why; and I resolved to refuse.

"No."

"How silly of me! But you will come, you must—I know how much you must miss *your* family, too. Besides, I have a special favor to ask." She paused for a while, but I did not respond. "I want you to look at my husband's poetry." There was something

about the way she said "husband" that made me uneasy, a particular emphasis, as if Hank's simple name would not do, only that generic, comic name which put him (and her, too) into my hands.

I said nothing.

"You *will* come, won't you. I'm a good cook. Really! And you must look at Hank's poetry. That's the real reason I'm asking you. It's really wonderful, you know. It *is!*" She insisted on the last word, as if my merely embarrassed silence were a scornful dissent. "He needs to be praised— Somebody must tell him how good he is! He's lost all his confidence and pride, he's . . . I'm coming in a minute!" She interrupted herself to answer Hank's impatient yell.

"But you're not just asking me because—"

"No, no. I want you to come. You *have* to! It's just that I'm an idiot when I talk to you. I'm not really an idiot, you know. It's just—well—I can only explain it like an idiot." She stopped to smile a smile worth all the words she could not find. "You must read his poems; you must like them and tell him so— He really admires you so, though he's shy. *He's* the one who really wants you to come— You must like them!"

She had placed her hands on my shoulders, looking directly into my eyes with her own wet, black ones. "Please say you'll come and look at the poems! It's important for us—for Hank and me— You don't understand, for our life together, for *me!*" And now she had moved up closer to me, the points of her breasts touching my chest.

Inside the house, the baby had started to cry and Hank at the door was calling, "Judy, for Christ's sake!"

"I'll come," I said, feeling ashamed at her excessive look of gratitude, the warmth with which she said, "Oh, thank you," and was gone.

It was seven before I arrived at the Somers's apartment. I knew really that it was important I be on time; but I stopped by for Ed Fenton on the way and he insisted that I have a drink, rising up out of his books and papers with the air of someone

who has earned by a good day's work the right to plunge into insensibility.

"Forty-two pages today!" he cried triumphantly. "Another month and my big one will be done. They said I wouldn't live so long, those bastards, those high-priced bastards. I'll eat their hearts and livers. I'm calling it *The Lexicon of Myth and Desire*—that ought to sell it on the drugstore bookstands, eh, boy? They thought I'd never make it, those New York specialists—an old lush with a one-cylinder ticker. *Shicker is' ah goy, eh, boy?*"

"Look here!" I began with the small boy's indignation into which he always betrayed me.

"For God's sake, son, don't make any speeches on anti-Semitism. We're both on the other side of that crap—way on the other side!" He embraced me, smelling repulsively of his long day's sweat and making me long for the cool odor of my own cologne. "We should understand each other, Milton. We're on the same side, for God's sake. In our racket, we have to close ranks."

But this time it had not been his anti-Semitism which had disturbed me (and what the hell kind of a righteous Jew am I, anyhow), so much as his energy and accomplishment—a dying man! I had not written a line since my breakup with my wife six months before; and at Darlington, I had played the entertainer instead of the poet. "Let's go," I said hopelessly.

"Go! Let's have a drink!" We had three, finally, the first to death, the second to us, the third to goddamnall; and found Judith when we arrived quivering and annoyed. Excited, she had a strange smell, not unpleasant really, but arid and thin. Her hands trembled visibly as she reached out to take ours and draw us into the foul little basement apartment, its walls stained with damp, its foreseeable books in their orange crates, its meaningless rickety furniture that had never really belonged to anyone. I had forgotten the look of a graduate student's house, that most dismal of bohemias.

In one corner Hank squatted on his haunches, leaning over a baby who lay naked and covered with prickly heat on a blanket on the floor. He was fanning the child with a paper fan that read:

DRINK GRIESEDICK'S BEER! THE BEER OF THE ELITE. A bare electric bulb that dangled on a wire from the cracked ceiling seemed to make the heat visible. I could feel my sweat oozing out, as I entered, like blood from an unstanch'd wound.

"It's hot," Judith remarked pointlessly, "and you're late. And the roast's overdone. And it's the first roast we've had in a year. How stupid I am!" She tried to laugh. "Oh, excuse me, excuse me, and sit down." She indicated the one easy chair, the two rickety wooden ones—and seemed suddenly near tears.

"Take it easy, Jude," Hank called without lifting his head from the baby who stared up hypnotized into his eyes; and with his head still down, added, "Welcome, gentlemen."

We managed somehow to get through dinner, though Judith, trembling still, broke a plate and a cup, barely missed Fenton with some spilled gravy, apologized excessively for the food, kept losing sentences in embarrassed pauses and making malapropisms at which Fenton bellowed with great good humor. He was still euphoric at the thought of those forty-two pages, to which he referred several times. I said scarcely anything, not sure why I was there, but watching Hank for a clue, though he in turn never took his eyes from his wife, whom he followed with an inexplicable air of humility, saying over and over like a charm, "Take it easy, Jude."

Once he managed to turn to me long enough to observe, "This is important for Her." He referred to Judith with real capitals like a queen. "She's always nervous over things like this." But when I, nervous, too, and puzzled, had snapped, "What things?" he cast his eyes down again without answering. The baby cried all through the meal, impersonally but with considerable volume, and Hank rose finally to tend it where it lay.

"I'm really sorry about the food," Judith said over the coffee. "I'll bet your wives are both excellent cuisines—I mean, cooks."

"Neither of mine," Fenton answered. "The first one was rich, so we always had a cook. And with the second, I do the little cooking that gets done. Mostly we drink our meals."

"But surely yours, Mr. Amsterdam?"

"Wonderful!" I declared shamelessly. I had actually liked Ei-

leen's cooking at first, for its difference from my mother's; the most banal non-kosher foods, tripe or pork sausages or headcheese, seeming to me a sign of revolt, a rejection of my unloved past. I had never even had a steak at home. But really Eileen was without imagination or enthusiasm in the kitchen, as in bed, everywhere dull, dull, dull. "Let's not talk about home," I interrupted myself shamelessly, "it makes me feel too lonely—" As I gazed away out of the half-window that let in a little of the last light, I felt an incredibly real nostalgia for my imaginary household. "I even miss the noise!"

"She's a lucky woman," Judith sighed, and only Ed Fenton laughed, too pleased with himself to challenge me.

He had brought along a bottle of whisky, which we all welcomed, Judith especially throwing the first drink into herself with an exaggerated gesture of abandon.

"Our last magic!" I told her, and she giggled, as if at some splendid quip.

"Take it easy, Jude," Hank said, turning toward us over one shoulder his face, whose fixed paleness seemed a mask or the make-up of a silent movie comedian. His back tapered classically to his narrow waist with an impressive ripple of muscles under his sweat-soaked shirt. I wondered what he thought of me.

After two more quick stiff drinks, Judith began to laugh, almost hysterically. "How silly I am—how silly I am! Why you're just human, after all. . . ."

"I can't answer for Milton," Fenton said. "As for me I'm prepared to demonstrate on demand."

"But what the hell is wrong with Carl Sandburg? I like him," Hank cried suddenly, wheeling around. It was a continuation of our discussion the night before, during which Hank had said nothing, only stared from face to face, turning his head with the conversation as if it were something really passing through the air, a ping-pong ball, a shuttlecock. "He's *real*—full of power and truth—the real America. My America. I know it." He held up his two large knotted fists under our noses, as if for inspection, as if they were the real America.

"Out of the quarrel with ourselves poetry—out of the quarrel

with others, rhetoric." It was Fenton quoting, but he was not really interested, merely responding mechanically on cue.

For me and Hank, though, it was a real discussion, in code, of course, for neither of us yet knew exactly what was at stake between us.

"He's not a poet, that's the only thing wrong with him! He doesn't make forms or music—just speeches. He's not real at all; he gives you only words—tough words, but still words. Where are 'hands that can grasp, eyes that can dilate . . .'"

"'Hair that can rise if it must . . .'" Fenton capped my beginning, glad to be playing the old game.

"Should I put on some music? I have Brahms's Fourth—" Judith had risen and was straightening her skirt over her full thighs; she must have put on weight recently, for the cloth was pulled too tight, a seam on her right flank opening. From beneath her skirt, her legs, white, hairless and slender, tapered so quickly that they seemed almost too thin. I could feel tingling in my hands how it would be to touch her high up under the darkness of that too-tight skirt, the smooth doughy pallor of her inner thigh where it met the first crisp, damp wisps of hair. "Hands that can grasp . . ."

"He's *real*, for God's sake! It's you fellows who are word merchants, aesthetes—Raw experience! that's why you don't understand him. It *hurts* too much to understand him." I had never heard Hank talk at such length, and I was amazed that Judith, searching through a pile of records, could ignore so extraordinary an event, Fenton pay no attention. "Form—music! The kind of pattern life's got, Sandburg's got. But I can understand how that's hard to see from New York."

"I live in Texas."

"Don't any of you people *like* music? You can keep talking if you like—you don't have to be still."

"You *live* in Texas—but it's where you come from that counts. Where were you born?"

"New York."

"You *see*!" He turned triumphantly toward Fenton, who was nodding as if in agreement, though with whom it would have

been difficult to say. "I suppose you like Wallace Stevens?" He said it as if it were the name of a disease.

"Sooo—I'll put on the Brahms, *and* I'll have another drink." She poured herself another, very dark, with the air of someone compounding a dangerous remedy.

"I met him in Chicago once, in '19 or '20," Fenton put in, before I could answer.

"Who?" I asked. It annoyed me to think of the year 1919, when I was five years old and Fenton already full of the power to harm and love.

"Who, for Christ's sake? Sandburg! He was stupid, you know—just a fish gasping on the strand. The only time he was really happy was when he was playing that damn banjo of his. He should have been a vaudeville actor, a dialect comedian—in the American dialect. Like the Jews who used to imitate Jews." He looked over at me with a wink of complicity. "Personally I prefer Smith and Dale. 'I'd like to see you inhale?' 'You'd like to see me in hell?'" His Yiddish accent was deliberately atrocious, a real provocation.

"But this is Weingartner! I borrowed it specially for tonight. Just listen to the—"'

"God damn it," Hank shouted, pounding one of his large, red fists on the floor, "I still want to know what's wrong with him. Why doesn't anybody face up to the—"

"Oh, shush, dear, you'll wake the baby!" Judith had moved over beside Hank, and was ruffling his hair tenderly.

"Don't get me wrong, Amsterdam. I like *your* poetry, too. I like different kinds of poetry—and I think you're god-damn good. You're no Wallace Stevens."

"Thanks."

"No! Don't give me that New York high hat. I like what you do, Amsterdam. I like you. And I don't bullshit. What I say, I mean. Don't I, Jude?"

"He does, Mr. Amsterdam. He likes you better than any of the younger poets."

"You've got them all beat six ways from the ace, Amsterdam. But it's too *easy* for you—that's what gets me mad. There's a

kind of club and you were born belonging to it. You're in and Hank Somers is out. You know what's bad and you know what's good, and you even know why. But I don't know beans." He looked for a moment as if he were going to weep. "What's more, you know where to get published, too, because you've got friends who were born feeling the same way. And don't they know it—oh, don't they just know it!"

"'20 it must have been," Fenton cut in. He had been puzzling away at the date all along, as heedlessly in his own groove as the record making mechanically all those enormously Brahmsian statements, while only Judith listened or pretended to. "Certainly '20—because a year later I went to France. It was before I knew Zelda and Scott, I remember that clearly. And a year after they bounced me out of the Yale Theological Seminary in '18—giving me back to literature and life. You know why I was expelled?" He wanted us with him, but only on his own terms, in his own world—and no one would listen.

"But nobody publishes Hank Somers. And I'm good, too. I'm good—I know it. I'd know if I was bad, wouldn't I? Am I right, Jude?"

"He's a little drunk, but he's right, Mr. Amsterdam."

"But I'm no Jew, Amsterdam. Let's be frank with each other. Leave me alone, Judy—just let me talk. I respect the Jews; I *love* them, God damn it; but they're in and I'm out—they've inherited the earth. If you're not a Jew or a god-damn fairy like that—like that—"

"Fleetwood Demby," I helped him out.

"A Jew or a fairy, you can't get published in America. Who the hell does this country belong to?"

"Look at Fenton," I said hopelessly, "he's no homosexual or Jew either, God knows, and—"

But Fenton was paying no attention. "Do you know why I was thrown out of that Seminary into the lap of literature? For writing a term paper on self-abuse in the Old Testament. Self-Abuse in the Old Testament. I proved the crime of Onan wasn't masturbation at all, but simple birth control by withholding. Did you know that?"

"I'm not saying it isn't fair, Amsterdam. The Jews have *earned* every god-damn thing they've got." Hank had seated himself in front of me on the floor, leaning forward until his forehead almost touched mine, and staring into my eyes with his own pale, watery, round blue ones, as if he were trying to hypnotize me. "This is a Jewish Age—an age of Jewish art and Jewish science—psychoanalysis, sociology. But we don't understand it, Amsterdam—we others—it doesn't speak our language. Leave me alone, Judy. Take these kids who come here from New York to give us poor yokels the word. Take that Herbert Ginsburg." He picked the most obvious example, of course, a cartoonist's Jew, one of the assistants in political science, who was always in the center of our evening discussions, his long nervous hands fluttering, and his sal-low head, with the oily, black hair and the large glasses on the eager, curved nose, moving up and down, up and down. . . . "Herb can talk rings around me on any subject, including those he doesn't know a frigging thing about. But for Christ's sake, I know I'm smarter than he is. I just don't have the vocabulary; I wasn't born into the god-damn Club."

"Can't we change the subject," Fenton objected. "The only thing I have against the Jews is that people spend too much time talking about them—especially the Jews themselves. When I was your age, Somers, I'd never met a Jew. Listen, I came down out of that Seminary to conquer New York, the dewiest goy that ever lived. But I had a copy of *Thus Spake Zarathustra* under my right arm, and a pair of brass knuckles in my left pocket!"

He stopped to laugh, and Hank roared into the gap, "When you were my age—" It was apparently the only thing he had heard of Fenton's whole harangue. "How old do you think I am? I'm no child. Thirty, that's what I am, thirty last week—and this god-damn successful Amsterdam, this—this loverboy, this poet everyone loves, he can't be more than a year or two older— Seven children!"

"I'm thirty-eight." And lost, too, I wanted to add, trapped in the admiration and contempt of those that do not really know me; but there was nothing I could have said that would not have made me seem an even more arrant prig than I felt.

"You don't look it," Judith interposed. "You look younger than Hank."

"Thirty years old and I've never published anything—not a line. Do you know that I haven't been able to write for a year thinking of how it would be to be thirty. How can I be sure I'm alive when no one will tell me so—and I'm already halfway to being dead. I don't want to be loved, Amsterdam, just to have someone know I was here. Here!" He pointed violently at his thick, sweaty chest, so there could be no doubt about exactly where he was. "But don't get me wrong, I *like* the Jews. The man who first convinced me I knew how to write—God damn him—he was a Jew. He taught me everything. I wasn't dumb before I knew him, just unawakened—a Landon man, Amsterdam. He taught me the score politically, every way. I was a jerk until I met him—a Jew!"

"He's a professor here, a professor of French. You'd like him, Mr. Amsterdam; he's really a lot like you. Maybe you've seen some of his articles in *Masses and Mainstream*."

I shuddered, imagining the type, smart-aleck and Stalinist, with his kit of standard opinions, blackmailing a handful of provincial kids into admiration with the unearned advantage of his New York birth. Like me, I told myself, like me!

"It's a shame he isn't here this summer. You'd like Professor Alexander."

"'Of a lineage once abhorred, nor yet redeemed from scorn!'" It was a line I had difficulty exorcising that summer, but even as I said it, Fenton had found his own touchstone, waving one hand at the three of us grouped together across the room from him, and repeating at us in contempt, "'What are all these fish that lie gasping on the strand?' 'What are all these fish that lie gasping on the strand?'" while Hank kept insisting, "I love that man, Amsterdam. I'm his son, really. God damn it! And Judy likes him, too, don't you, Judy?"

He turned those round, skeptical eyes from me to her, and as she looked down demurely at the question, I could not help wondering whether there were not a note of bitterness, the vestige of an old suspicion in his voice. Certainly, she did not answer un-

til her husband had gone on, crying out, "Sometimes I wish to Christ I were a Jew!" And Judith responded, "Oh, but I do always. Wish I were, I mean. When I was little I wanted to be a boy, but ever since I reached fifteen I've wanted that other. To be born again—a Jew and an Easterner. They're so far *ahead!* I always feel that I'm limping along behind like the little lame girl in the story, that the mountain will close before I get there!"

"And I wish I were asleep." Fenton rose, a little stiffly, and I realized for the first time how small he was, even smaller than I. "By God, perhaps I am!" He was obviously annoyed, perhaps a little ill, too. "I'm sorry but I just can't stay awake. Please don't bother."

But Judith had started to walk him to the door, pulling me up beside her as she went. "You come, too, Mr. Amsterdam—and say good night, like a good boy."

We stood for a little while side by side just outside the door; watching Fenton move off, I felt young, almost as young as Judith. The air was no cooler really than inside the house, but I had a sense of relief at being away from the smell of the baby and the partly burned dinner, away from Hank.

"Are you sorry you came along?" she asked. "I felt the need for some protection. The night he arrived that vain old man made a pass at me. See, there's the moon!" And there it was, indeed, looking very unconvincing above the back yard, in which four iron poles rose out of a rubble of seared grass and empty beer cans, and a score of diapers hung motionless in the oppressive dark. Judith had pressed up almost against me, her breasts bobbling just under my nose as she lurched a little uncertainly; she was considerably taller than I. My mouth was on the level of her long, obviously proffered neck, and I kissed her there, feeling the muscle and cartilage move with the movement of her breath under the smooth salty flesh.

"I like the way you taste," I said, pulling her the final inch toward me, but I had not foreseen the fury with which she would respond, enveloping me in the total blind surge of an amoeba ingesting its food. Her two large, flat hands were on my shoulder-blades, pressing me upwards; and her mouth on mine, loose and

wet, so that her saliva trickled down my chin, while her tongue, taut and furious, was thrusting into me as if my whole dark inwards were a sheath for its quivering length. It was absurd to be kissed so malely, from above; and I tilted her backward until her knees bent, one hand in the small of her back, the other under her skirt. She wore nothing underneath, no girdle, no pants—and her ass was surprisingly, pleasantly cool, though the little tuft of hair where the buttocks began to swell and separate was damp with perspiration.

Some students passing in a car hooted at us in good-natured mockery, for we were spotted in the fall of light from a street-corner lamp. Looking up, I could see the shirtless men, the hypnotically rocking ladies watching us dully from the porch across the way between slapping at mosquitoes. The students roared by a second time with much horn-blowing and cries of encouragement, and I could hear them screaming into a turn at the next corner for a third venture. "Look now," I protested, "we're goldfish in a bowl!"

But she was not listening, her head bent over my hands, kissing them, and her breath coming thick and labored. She had not heard the students nor noticed the neighbors; and if she had, she would not have cared. "Oh, this is just what I wanted," she whispered, "just what I wanted. You don't know how long I've been waiting!"

Between the terror I felt at the discrepancy of our desires, and the pity stirred in me by the excessive tug of her need, my cautious, trivial excitement drained out of me. To hide my confusion from myself, I let my head fall onto her breast, kissing the white rise of flesh, coolly and as if according to plan; and I knew with a pang of nausea the failure and shame that make a Don Giovanni. But she moved away uneasily.

"Don't!" she protested. "I *hate* my breasts. They're so obvious and stupid. Like the girl on the cover of a movie magazine." And she led me in.

"You were a long time," Hank noted mildly when we entered. It was hard to tell from the pale mask of his face if he were really disturbed or not. He had finished the bottle while we were

gone, and was slumped now in the easy chair beside the phonograph, watching the needle speed frantically in the trap of the final groove. The baby was asleep, and there was no sound except for the endless hushed rasp of the record.

Judith turned it off with one hand, falling into Hank's lap, and ruffling his lank reddish hair, as she kissed him tenderly once beside each ear. Meanwhile, he scrutinized her gently with that humility I could not understand, one stiff hand on either side of her thickish waist, and his head bowed in self-abasement. "You need a shave," she said to him, and to me, "Isn't he *cute*?"

But I, baffled by the surge of jealousy my desire surely did not justify, merely stared at them dumbly, thinking, "The glib Jews, oh, those glib Jews!" It irked me that Hank should profit by the passion I had stirred in his wife and for which I had no use.

"And he's a good poet, too," she added, rising decisively, and taking from the top of a bookcase an untidy pile of papers. For an instant, I felt as if Judith had tried to buy from me with the embrace of a moment before my approval of her husband's verse, and I almost cried out, "I never read the poetry of my friends!"

But Hank cut me off. "Oh, Christ, Judith, don't bother Mr. Amsterdam with that stuff! It's all hogwash, you know—" Yet he seemed all at once almost cold sober, and reached out to take the poems, which, after a moment's urging, he began to read aloud in his flat, meaningless voice. He would look up at the end of each piece, half proud, half embarrassed, with an engaging grin I had not seen before; and I, glib Jew, would force myself to say something in comment and praise.

Actually, I could not listen. The heat in that low-roofed basement was like an intended torture; my handkerchief was too wet to dry my face any longer; and I could feel the sweat on my forehead pearl drop by drop, hang, and run slithering beside my nose into the corner of my mouth. When I raised my right hand to my face, I could smell on it the female smell of Judith.

She was sitting on the floor beside me, both of us looking up at Hank, except when she would turn to me her melting face in an abandon too naked and proud to hide. She would reach out compulsively from time to time to grab my hand or stroke my

thigh; once even kissing my shoulder, with only the barest pretense of caution, her breast pressed against my arm.

And with each caress she would cry aloud, "Isn't it *wonderful*. I told you he was good. He won't believe how good he is!" as if the comments atoned for her gestures, or the gestures for the comments, it was hard to tell which. If Hank noticed what was going on (and how could he have helped it), he said nothing; perhaps he too felt that something must be paid for my presence.

"It's hard to tell just from listening," I said. "I'll have to take them home with me, go over them carefully."

At this, the baby awoke, screaming in a sudden start of anguish, and Judith took her up into her arms to soothe her, cooing over her pain with the same indiscriminate love that was washing over Hank and me. "Oh, my poor baby, she's so hot, so *hot!* Mama's poor baby. Hank, take Susie up to the Burnhams. They have a screened-in porch," she explained, turning to me. "It's so much cooler. But sit with her, Hank, until she falls asleep again. Don't leave her screaming!" She stared at me as she said this in terrible openness, to be sure I knew why she was doing it, to be *sure*.

"You'll have to make a bottle first." He clearly did not want to go, but seemed helpless before her, abject in the face of her superior passion, or perhaps ashamed for the pang of jealousy he felt, resolved to make it up to her.

"Certainly, dear." She stooped to kiss him on the nose on her way out, and disappeared into the tiny dim alcove of the kitchen, where we could hear her moving about behind the grease-stained flowered curtain.

During her absence, Hank turned to me twice, opening his mouth and raising his hand in a gesture of one about to enter a plea, but he finally said nothing.

No sooner was he out of the door, than Judith flung herself down beside me, as one throws away something of little worth; wordlessly, she engaged me, her mouth on and over mine, that dark insistent tongue probing, her teeth thrust against mine almost painfully. We fell sideways onto the rug, she pressed into me so that her whole lower body touched mine at every point; and she

ground into me the soft belly, the hard pelvic bone, circle and thrust, circle and thrust, with an impersonal force that was more an assault than an embrace. Though my hands and lips were moving up and down her, I could not really touch her; it was as if she were masturbating alone in an unknowable place toward which she ran headlong, her breath faltering painfully and her heart pounding so hard between us that for a moment I feared she might faint or die.

It seems now inconceivable that I did not take her completely there on the floor; but I was afraid that Hank might return at any moment, and besides, a kind of coldness had begun to grow in me at the madness, the desperation of her desire. Her motive seemed a force beyond passion, a kind of voluptuousness no more akin to love than hate, aimed at assailing behind the image of the spoiled poet or the beloved Jew, behind any me however genuine, my special maleness—or even some larger impersonal potency that I shared also with Hank, and which she could not attain.

"Look," I tried to say at one point, "your husband will—" But it struck me as funny to be worrying about the returning husband like an actor in a farce, and I felt such an imbecile I could not finish. Though the tidal motion of her hips had ceased at last, and she had rolled away from me to lie prone with her hands folded behind her head, she was not listening to me.

"Do you know," she began as if to herself, "Hank hasn't made love to me in six months. Not even this much. He never wants me any more. If he would only take me like this—only this—I would be so happy. You're so strong, Milton, so strong." She reached over to touch my biceps submissively, gentle now and weary and beautiful as I had almost forgotten. "I know that it's his writing that's the trouble. If he could only publish something he would feel like *a man*. He would feel he had *earned* me, earned the right to love me. He's very—very chivalrous." She laughed quietly to herself at the ridiculous word. "I try to understand him! I try very hard—"

There was the expected sound from above at last, Hank stumbling down the stairs toward the cellar.

"I've been faithful to him for two years, two and a half now. I swear to you, you're the first I've gone even this far with, and God knows it's been hard. I'm pretty, you know, and—and I need loving, a lot of it. But he doesn't want me. You *want* me, don't you, Milton?" She had risen before I could answer, almost as if she were afraid to wait for my response; and had gone into the kitchen alcove, where she turned on the water, very hard. "It's just that poetry of his, I know. If only someone would tell him how good it is. He needs confidence so badly, and I can't seem to give it to him—confidence in his own power—Oh, Milton, I love you."

She seemed quite unaware of the inconsequence of her final remark, and meanwhile, Hank was at the door, smiling sheepishly at me, as if preparing to apologize for something in which he had been caught out.

"Susie's asleep—asleep. I hope you enjoyed yourself while I was gone."

"If you call washing dishes enjoying yourself!" Judith shouted over the clatter in the sink. She was not, I suppose, really trying to deceive him, merely acting for the sake of some code I did not understand, some abstract notion of what a woman must do, perhaps even—the notion terrified me—out of love.

"It's late. I have to go." I started for the door quickly, in a kind of flight, but Judith followed, wiping her hands on her apron. "You never even talked about your children," she said plaintively. "I still don't even know their names."

"Stay, stay!" Hank insisted. "You haven't really told me yet what's wrong with Carl Sandburg. It was just getting interesting."

But I was already through the door and into the desolate yard, where the mosquitoes hung over my head, their incessant hum like a sullen threat that cannot be fulfilled. Judith came out after me, Hank's poems in her hand.

"You forgot these," she said accusingly. "We have to *help* him, Milton!" It was as if we were old accomplices; and when I reached out to take the manuscript, she leaned over to kiss me again, meekly this time, her hands clasped behind my neck. I could see

in the glare of the street lamp how pale her lips were, kissed clean of lipstick; and I could taste her blood where I must have bitten her earlier. And if it were really love that moved her, why was I so close to panic?

"There's no sense to this," I whispered urgently. "This is an end, not a beginning. Good-by." I pressed her to me hard to emphasize the point: it was over. Over! And in my relief at being safely through it all, I felt toward her not tenderness perhaps, but the mildest sort of regret, a wish that in a way I might have—

If she heard my farewell, she did not believe it. "Oh, tighter," she moaned, "hold me tighter. Why doesn't Hank hold me like this. Oh, Milton—I even like your *name*."

It must have been at this point that I dropped the poems, though I did not realize it until later when I was back in my room, troubled and sleepless in the dormitory bed. "No more," I insisted then. "It's stupid for you and cruel to Hank and *enough!*"

"I'm on the morning shift this week at the Campus Grille—I'll be home every night alone. Hank's got a job as a bartender from eight till closing." She did not listen at all, only stared at me as if she were memorizing my face. "It's up to you now, Milton—up to you!"

"I won't come!" I don't know whether I spoke the words aloud, or only over and over to myself like a sulky child: I won't, I won't, I won't!

The next morning before my first poetry session, I went into the Campus Grille for a cup of coffee. In half an hour I knew I would be standing safely before the group who admired me, reading Dylan Thomas, the images exploding here and there along the long phrases like fireworks in a wide night sky, and the class would sigh passionately with the passionate music of my voice; but now I could only remember that I had forgotten the damned poems, and this seemed to me the ultimate, the only real betrayal.

Judith came to take my order, shy somehow and *very* grave.

Though I said nothing about the poems, she understood, bringing the manuscript back with the coffee and tossing it down before me reproachfully.

"Hank never saw it. I slipped it under my skirt. Why did you ever leave it behind?"

"It was an accident." I could not even believe myself.

"An accident!" She pretended to be mopping a stubborn spot on the table. "Do you want to ruin everything? Just when we're beginning to build up his confidence—"

"His confidence!" I could not help protesting, though I knew I had no right. "You're destroying him where it hurts the most and you give me lectures about confidence. What good will a few lies about his poems do when you play footsie right under his eyes!"

"Remember in a former time . . . ,'" she began to misquote back at me.

"'Learn that in a former time . . . ?'"

"Schoolteacher! 'Learn that in a former time,/Love, sweet love was thought a crime.'"

But it was not love at all, I wanted to tell her, not *love*. It was robbery, expropriation, mayhem. As far as Hank was concerned, I had everything a man wanted: wife, children, published books, success, esteem, even Jewishness. Everything except her. And if I took her—

"I don't want you to *deceive* him, poor Milton. There's no question of lying about his poems. You said yourself they were good."

"Good? His poems?" I cried righteously. "Who's talking about his poems. It's you I'm talking about, you. You take his balls away, and then you have the nerve to—"

"Oh, Milton, all that silliness about balls. You don't know anything really. I think that's why I—" She leaned against the table to let a student pass by her down the aisle, took the opportunity to brush back a hair from my forehead. Then suddenly, inexplicably, she was furious. "Last night Hank made love to me for the first time in six months. What do you think of that? You and

your balls." She grinned at me triumphantly, and I could not resist a pang of jealousy.

"Congratulations! I hope you'll be very happy together."

"Oh, Milton! Don't be a *fool!* I've borne his baby. I've worked for him—I've given up a year from my own studies to let him write. I'm a good wife." Her hand moved blindly with the rag, around and around the table, her eyes filling with tears. "I'm a person, too. Who's going to do something for me? I have a *right* to have some—"

"Some fun?" I suggested bitterly. "Some good clean fun?" I could not stand any more, and I rose, jarring the cup, so that the untouched coffee slopped over the rim onto the table where she continued mechanically to sop it up. "Excuse me," I said, pushing past her familiar softness, "excuse me."

I could see her as I turned to look back from the door, her eyes incredibly black with panic and tears, and her mouth not cruel at all, only frightened as she cried almost soundlessly, "What's wrong with me, darling? Oh God, what's *wrong* with me!"

Looking down at my hand, I was pleased to see that this time I had remembered the poems. Pleased.

That morning Judith did not appear in my discussion group. But the next day she was there as if nothing had happened, rapt and somehow satisfied as she stared at me from the first row without taking notes or smiling or really listening at all; while all around her the gossip and admiration rippled in excited whispers. I cannot say even now whether it was she who fed the rumors, or whether one of the other members of the group who lived in her house was responsible; but somehow a mythicized version of our encounter was current, and I could feel the class purr under my hand, more flatteringly than ever.

In the context of their approval, I began to consider my relationship with Judith a rather gallant adventure. To have moved in her so passionate a response under the eyes of her large, threatening husband, did this not require, after all, courage and aplomb? And to be giving her up now for the sake of that hus-

band (his poetry was unexpectedly good—incoherent and full of accidents, but authentic), did that not show an even greater courage, a real maturity? I wished that my ex-wife had been there, with her eternal complaint that I had remained a child. For the first time in my life, I loved myself that summer; I truly loved myself! I knew that those silly old women had seen behind my mask of fear and insecurity the real self even I had never given its due.

But the true climax of my summer came only with my public lecture on the last night of the Conference. Walking through the lobby of the auditorium, unrecognized, before I was due to begin, I could hear the easy wisecracks and snickers over the title of my talk, "The Poet, the Oyster and the Sensitive Plant"; and I was pleased. The lecture was being held in an air-conditioned place, so that there were too many people present, refugees from the heat, idly interested in seeing for once a real, living poet.

I was almost sorry that I had not worn my double-breasted Palm Beach suit and the hand-painted tie with the naked girls. I had hesitated for a long time before choosing the Oxford gray flannel outfit which with the thinnest of knitted black ties and my brand-new crew cut gave me the air of an up-and-coming young mortician. The most important thing, after all, was to look as little like Edgar Allan Poe as possible!

"I would not be here tonight," I began, "if I did not also hate poetry, as the patient on the operating table hates his cancer, or a man his wife on their golden anniversary." I could feel the unwilling hush of the crowd, the reluctance with which they abandoned all hope of being bored. "Which is why I have taken the title of my talk from Thomas Hood, a buffoon, an anti-poet—but, alas, the greatest writer of English verse in the second half of the nineteenth century, a man among the oysters and sensitive plants. 'Oh, flesh, flesh, how thou art fishified!'"

At this point, Fleetwood Demby, who was sitting in the front row, shrieked in real delight, clapping his hands together impulsively; thus giving the signal to everyone that I was only being funny (I was, as always, not sure), and they began to laugh with relief and gratitude. The speech was pure exhibitionism,

compounded in equal parts of vanity and malice, a poet's revenge; but by the time I had reached the conclusion, reading excerpts from "Miss Kilmansegg and her Precious Leg," I was almost convinced that Hood was a truly great poet, and I knew with a pang that everyone present had surrendered to his nonsense as none of them had ever surrendered to my more serious verses.

And the jury debated from twelve to three
What the verdict ought to be,
And they brought it in as Felo de Se,
"Because her own leg had killed her!"

Afterwards, there were the hand-squeezings and shoulder-slappings, and the confidential asides of those eager to make it perfectly clear that the joke was on someone else. Eight or ten of my own poetesses, who had waited humbly for the chance to be heard, came last of all to assure me that I had been a "real experience," "a revelation," and that their lives "were forever changed"; I felt a maudlin affection for the self they all loved, and I pressed their wrinkled hands warmly, even kissed the one blue-haired old lady who frankly wept.

Finally, I was alone with Demby, Miss Manfred and Chuck Bligh, who cried variously, "Delicious!" and "It was real cute!" and "Great work, Milton! We'll have to have you come back again!" In my glow of self-esteem, I even permitted Bligh that "Milton" as his reward.

Only Fenton's acknowledgment was necessary for my complete pleasure, and I looked around for him uneasily. "Ed Fenton was here tonight, wasn't he?"

"Here and awake!" He had come up behind me. "I even *listened* to you Milton, and I never listen to other people's lectures —only once in a while to my own. What a performance! Were you ever an actor, boy? Listen,"—he drew me aside conspiratorially, dropping his voice—"in that passage about Marx and Hood, where you seemed to pick that crack about 'falsies of history' out of the air,"—he looked surreptitiously over one shoulder—"it was really in your notes the whole time, wasn't it?"

I stared at him, speechless as always; and without waiting for an

answer he began to laugh. "Never mind. Never mind. This is no country for old men—" He took me by the arm in one of those strange accesses of friendliness that seemed to surprise him like waves of nausea. The flabby flesh of his forearms under the gray tired hair disgusted me, and I remembered how, before I knew him, I had, only half-jokingly, wished his death. He was wearing a purple sport shirt and a pair of old duck pants that hung from him loosely as if he had recently grown much thinner. I thought again with resentment of how misleading his natty, opaque essays were; for he had no style at all in his living, only the vestiges of a shabby, old-fashioned recklessness for which my generation has no use.

"Excuse me," I said, moving away from Fenton, his ugliness and his skepticism, out into the summer night. Suddenly I wanted only to be alone with my elation; and I moved onto the stone veranda, into the stifling night. My flannel jacket was too heavy for me, strangling, and as I struggled to slip out of it, I could feel someone behind me take hold of the collar to help. Turning to say thank you, I discovered Judith.

"What did you think of it?" I could not help asking, the feel of the applause in me still, like the sense of the sea after a day at the shore.

"You were very handsome."

"What an answer!"

"I never make the right answers. You'll just have to get used to it." For a moment she seemed to consider crying, then changed her mind. "Hank and I are giving a farewell party for the Writers' Conference tonight. We've just decided. There'll be all sorts of stupid people there—but it won't matter. Please, come!"

"Thanks," I said coldly, "but I—"

"Let's go, Milton. After all, I'll be there, and we've got a lot to celebrate, you and I." It was Fenton, who had come up unnoticed. "Demby and Miss Manfred are flying out tonight, and Bligh's driving them to the airport. So it's up to us. How can Mrs. Somers bid farewell to the Writers' Conference without any writers!"

"I'm sorry about the others," I said to Judith. "It must be a disappointment—"

"I don't *care* about the others, and you know it, Milton. Come!" She was oblivious of Fenton, who grinned happily at my discomfiture.

"I'm tired and hot and I want to change first. Maybe later." I wanted really to stand under a shower, and let the thoughts of the last thirteen days run over and over through my mind: the shining eyes, the cries of delight, the applause.

Judith merely stared at me in silence, her eyes growing larger and larger, beginning to brim over in their slow, exasperating way.

"Ed Fenton will be glad to entertain you on the way home." I don't know why I wanted to hurt her, but I was pleased when she tried to slap me, the tears really falling now. Why wouldn't she admit that it was all over! I caught her wrist and said, "I'll come back. I'm sorry."

"I'm sorry," she protested. "I never say anything right. I never understand anything."

"And I'm not sorry at all. 'An aged man is but a paltry thing . . . unless soul clap its hands and sing . . .' What would you like me to sing, Mrs. Somers?" He took her by the arm and drew her off, beginning some old vaudeville tune I did not recognize. She was laughing before they were out of hearing, and I thought a little ruefully that she seldom laughed with me.

In my own room, I saw the packet of Hank's poems on my bed, beside my already packed suitcase; the summer was almost over, and I knew I would have to go back to the party after all.

But by the time I arrived, the party was impenetrable to me. I saw neither Hank nor Judith, not even Fenton, only an endless surging of people I knew barely or not at all; some of them were already drunk, laughing uproariously at the ritual repetitions of jokes I had never heard, while the sober ones discussed politics in the loud, inflexible voices of those arguing not to convince but to be overheard. One earnest youngster was even in-

sisting to his girl, "You can't talk about 'oysters' and 'sensitive plants' in a vacuum. What's the *class basis* of bourgeois aestheticism, that's the point." But when I stood near them hopefully, he only glared, annoyed and not recognizing me.

The points and instances that were being raised everywhere were sickeningly familiar to me, the warmed-over sophistries of fifteen years of Communist apologetics, giving me the sense of being served again a mess I had vomited up years before. I moved in my loneliness (only a moment ago everyone was clapping and crowding around me) from room to room through the three apartments of that shabby lodging house, in and out of which the party sprawled. It was like moving in a dream through the recollections of one's youth, powerless to change a single regretted idiocy. Powerless!

I discovered Fenton at last, surrounded by a cluster of students, who were leaning over him, eager to catch his words. It seemed the final offense. "He's telling us about the anti-Red hysteria at his school, Mr. Amsterdam." Herb Ginsburg, who was one of the listeners, stretched his thin yellow neck up toward me, hungrily, in search of new evidence for what he had always known. "Have there been any witch hunts in your part of the world?"

"Well," I said, irked at the comfortable platitudes, "to tell you the truth, we have a rather peculiar situation. Our local Board of Trustees are almost all—well, rather to the Left—"

"Progressives," a voice suggested helpfully.

"Exactly, Progressives. And they've just asked for the immediate resignation of all the Jews on the faculty—"

"The Jews?" another voice asked doubtfully.

"The Jews. There's nothing anti-Semitic, of course, since they're all, I should say we're all, *bourgeois* Jews. There's a form resignation with an attached confession of Zionism, Trotskyism, wrecking, shoplifting, pederasty and spying. They were—"

"You're joking!" Ginsburg said accusingly. "And it doesn't seem to me at a time like this—"

"It's reactionary!" a girl's voice cut in.

"I can't help it. I'm a bourgeois Jew." I looked at Fenton for

help, but he said nothing. I could feel the resentment and contempt of the group under their embarrassed politeness; and I welcomed it! After the long honeymoon of the Conference, it was like coming home. "Excuse me," I said, backing away. "Excuse me."

I would find Hank, give him his poems and leave. Finis. I came upon him finally in the yard, also alone and leaning against a tree, with a can of beer tilted to his lips. I took the beer from his hand and finished it.

"The real poet," he said thickly, "no oyster, no plant."

"Thank you for the beer."

"Thank you."

"I'm the one who should thank you."

"God damn it, can't I even thank you if I want to!"

I do not know why I failed to realize that he was already very drunk. I only knew that he was not looking at me out of his eyes; but I did not want to look at him either, for I knew the meaning of his mask now: the stylized face of the impotent, the cuckold. And with what face could I have looked back, with what—

I handed him his poems, which he stuck carelessly into a back pocket of his pants. "I'm glad to say I liked them very much, especially the group you call 'Family Dinner.' I was afraid I wouldn't."

"What were you afraid of? You didn't *have* to like them."

"Anyhow, I did."

"Thanks."

"You said that in advance." I went on to tell him exactly what had impressed me about the poems, and what I thought was wrong; but he only stood there, half-smiling and noncommittal. If he was pleased it didn't show. "You don't believe me? You don't believe you're a real poet?" Why should he have believed it? I could get no conviction into my voice, though I was not lying.

"I believe I'm a—" He looked around suspiciously. "Where's Jude?"

"I don't know."

His smile widened slyly, and he walked off, calling back over

his shoulder, "Thanks, Amsterdam. Thanks a lot." But I had wanted him to be happy, to like me for making him happy. After all, I was giving up a lot for him. A verse came into my head, and I said it over to myself:

The cuckold and the cuckold's friend,
They do not lie together;
Yet each holds up the other's end
In every sort of weather!

I tried to remember how I had felt that evening when the speech was over, and the waves of applause had washed up over me, but it was all fading from my mind. I needed to urinate, and as I stumbled up a dark stairwell toward the door someone had pointed out to me, I bumped into Judith coming down.

"It's you!" she cried delightedly. "You, Milton, and I was sure you weren't coming. And the party was only for you. For you and me—the whole party."

I kissed her and we stood looking at each other, neither of us moving. I was uncomfortable, and had nothing to say.

"Don't *hate* me, Milton!" she cried, looking at me in sudden alarm, and then, "But you have to go to the john. You only have to go, and I thought you hated me." Taking me by the arm, she led me to the door.

"I'll wait for you here," she said. "Don't worry."

"I'm not worried, it's just that—"

"You foolish boy, go and be done with it!"

Later we walked out into the back yard that was already full of drinkers and talkers under the invisible clotheslines which hung like hazards in the dark. Judith knew the location of each one, and she would cry "Duck!" just in time for us to crouch down together, run through, as if we were crossing no man's land. From one of the apartments, a record player was blaring revolutionary blues by Leadbelly and Josh White, songs of Spain from the days of the Lincoln Battalion.

I could not help feeling again that I was being drawn back down into my own stupid past—the years in Texas gone, the years of marriage swept away before the banalities that in 1936

had moved me to commitment and passion. The war in Spain! It was as if nothing else had counted, as if my life ever since had been only a masquerade that had fooled no one. I looked down at the girl beside me, scarcely past twenty, and I recalled what I had been sure once I would never forget: the self-pity, the melancholy horror of being young. And I longed for the comfortable ennui of maturity, even for the familiar pain of my marriage. "I'm a haunted house tonight, Judith. For Christ's sake, exorcize me."

She laughed a little doubtfully, and together we ducked around one corner of the house, out of sight of the rest of the party. Standing in a narrow lane, beside the untidy hedge of a neighboring garden, we hid like naughty children, who creep off to enjoy their small loot. I pressed Judith back against the peeling siding of the house, as I might have embraced a girl at sixteen; but she responded with the real, the atrocious assault with which I could not cope. Certainly, I myself had never felt anything as desperate and disorderly as her love—as love, it occurred to me, which, if it was like this, was indeed a crime, like youth, like—

"Darling, darling," she gasped between kisses, "I thought you hated me. I thought you weren't coming to my party at all."

Just then, lights flashed on in the darkened house beyond the hedge, and a head thrust from an upper window began to scream, more in hysteria than in real anger, "*Drunks! Trollops! Get out of my flower beds. I'll call the police! I know what you're up to down there. Drunken no-goods! Get out!*"

The sudden blaze of light, the mad voice and the frantic head frightened me as I have not been frightened in thirty years. I could feel my heart pound as if I were really the child I had been playing, really, in the child's absolute sense, *caught!* I could scarcely keep from crying out, "Please, momma, I'm not doing anything!" But Judith was pulling me back into her own yard, terrified and trembling; and there a half-dozen faces turned to stare at us, silent and uncertain.

"It's just that nut next door," someone shouted out of the dark, and everyone began to laugh, turning back from us to their own affairs; but I could feel Judith beside me, shaking with alternate giggles and sobs.

"Stop it!" I said, grabbing her by the shoulders. "Stop it!"

"I'm scared," she whispered. "Can you imagine it, scared! How stupid it all is. How ugly and stupid! The crazy old bitch. Oh, why didn't you come during the week?" She held out one hand to me, the fist balled, as one offers a surprise to a child; then opened her fingers right under my nose. "Look!"

I looked at the key on her open palm.

"It's for the attic apartment, the one that's empty. I'm supposed to show it when anyone comes. If you'd care to see it, Mr. Amsterdam?" She closed her hand again suddenly. "But I'm *afraid*. I don't want to go up now. Tell me, why don't I want to go up, when I want you so much? You know everything."

"You *do* want to," I said, thinking that, after all, this was the way it had to end: not in the dissipation of the myth but in its consummation, right here above all the foolish kids who resented me, and who recapitulated, without knowing it, my own hated youth. "Just because he's human," the phonograph was bellowing, "he doesn't want a bullet through his head. . . ."

She came along without another word; walking with me silently up the narrow stairs; waiting silently as I fumbled at the lock; pressing silently against me as we crossed the threshold into the black, fetid room. The heat was appalling; it seemed hardly possible to breathe, but when I started toward the window she stopped me.

"No windows, no lights," she whispered to me. "Don't move anything." Taking me by the hand, she led me through a jumble of furniture in what must have been the living room, then into a further room where we sat side by side on the bed. It was stripped and smelled a little of urine, only a stiff mattress between metal headpiece and footboard. I could hear the rustle of her dress as she pulled it over her head; and I undressed too, slowly, putting my clothes carefully on a low table beside the bed, where I would have no trouble finding them again in the dark.

After a while, I could make out the shapes of objects in the dim light that leaked through the single uncurtained window; and I was able to see that Judith was unbraiding her heavy hair, shaking it free finally with a gesture as formal as a dance step. She lay

down beside me, but wet with perspiration and dazed by the stagnant air, I remained for a while without touching her; then rolled over onto one elbow, and with my free hand felt her body from head to toe, very carefully, seeking a cue for the passion that did not come. Her flesh was very firm under the shifting play of her long, fine hair. But she had left on her brassière, and cried out softly in protest when I tore it off. "Oh, please don't! They're so ugly since I had the baby, I feel like an old woman."

Her breasts did sag a little, but they were magnificently heavy, cool and satiny on their underside where I kissed them, feeling their whole dumb weight on my cheek. "How white you are!" I said. "You even *feel* white in the dark."

"And you black, black—my gypsy—my black Jew!" Though my hair is very dark, my skin is actually quite fair, but I submitted to the legend of myself with real delight. I could feel my body beginning to stir, and I started to roll over on top of her.

"Wait," she cried. "Wait! I'm not prepared. I have no—"

"To hell with it. It's all the better." I was impatient, in my mind already a father. More important than the moment of possession seemed to me the consequence. I could imagine our son (a *real* son this time!), his pictures sent to me secretly, rarely—then not at all, after I had grown bored with writing and had moved too often for her letters to follow me. But he would be there always, somewhere, a real token of that summer when I was the world's beloved.

"No, really, Milton. You know how I would like to have your child, how *flattered* I would be. But I can't afford it; next year I want to go back to school. Seven children should be enough for anyone, anyhow! If you don't have any sort of—I brought along a—a contraceptive for you." She handed it to me in the dark, and I let it drop to the floor, rolling away from her, as my desire oozed out of me with the sweat. My poor son!

"What's the matter?" she asked. "Darling!" Her hand moved tentatively down over my shoulder, my chest, my belly into the darkest tangle of hair. "Oh, Milton, what's the matter with me?"

God knows what club of Hercules, what Thor's hammer she had dreamed to rend and redeem her, to be in her that summer's

climax and my legend's; she found only the torpor of my flesh. I felt no coldness, no panic, only an infinite languor, a relaxed sense of triumph over all the women I had ever known: my mother, my wife, the girls who— Yet something impelled me to another lie.

"Please understand. I'd like to, but I can't. I love my wife too much. I've never been unfaithful to her—and—I just can't."

"How lucky she is! How wonderful she must be! I could tell from her picture, just at a glance. Oh, Milton, I *do* understand." But she was crying, and suddenly kissing me all over, her mouth wet and very warm through her tangled hair, her tears mingling with my perspiration, until she found my mouth, and began again in all the fury of her understanding, this time against my slippery, dead flesh, the heaving, circling motion of her hips, over and over, until the tension in her broke. I felt a million miles away.

I must have fallen asleep for an instant, for I woke to see her shadow against the window. She was fully dressed and combing that incredible hair with great tenderness, as if it belonged to someone else and had only been lent to her for the occasion.

"You're very beautiful," I said, believing it. "Beautiful." But why then was I so sad, so undone.

"So are you. It's hard to believe that you didn't really—that we didn't—I feel so *satisfied*, so happy."

I let her go downstairs first alone; for she was suddenly cautious and worried. By the time I had finished dressing, pausing over each article of clothing to wonder why I had not been able to take her, and to tell myself that I did not care, Hank had already hit her for the first time.

My eyes had not adjusted to the brighter light, but I could see her clearly as I stood in the doorway above the street, see her just below me, quite distinctly, though small and remote as through a telescope. She was standing at one end of the circle the crowd had formed around them, not crying or attempting to fight back or even raising her hand to the scarlet place on her cheek, but just watching Hank as detachedly as I was watching them both, watching him lunge toward her for the second blow. He swung from far off, a stage punch, impressive, but not really intended to hurt; and

this they both understood.

"Where were you, Jude? God damn, where were you? You stupid bitch! You stupid bitch!"

The answer was clear, though she said nothing, for her face was soft and suffused with blood, her lips pale and swollen, her eyes still dissolved in languor.

"Go on in, Hank," she said quietly. "Go in and go to sleep. You're drunk again." He was much drunker than when I had seen him last, willing his drunkenness now, pulling it over him like a sheltering cover. Yet everyone seemed afraid of him, afraid to break out of the protection of the buzzing circle of spectators to confront him. Only Judith tried to stare him down, her eyes fixed on his baffled, slack face. But when she tried to touch him, he belowed in rage.

As I moved forward slowly, out of some dim sense of obligation, but without a plan, Fenton took me by the arm. "Get out of here, Milton, get out. Or somebody will get killed." I wanted to tell him that in our world such things no longer happened, that this was only the playing out of a myth, unreal; but he would not have understood.

He held his hand over his heart, theatrically I thought, as he pleaded with me; and when I shrugged him off impatiently, he staggered and fell to his knees. I had the stupid impulse to shout at him as if he were a stubborn child, to explain to him that it was all a mistake, that nobody could be hurt; but he had collapsed in a heap, moaning quietly to himself.

No one else had even noticed the sideshow, so I bent to pick him up, feeling only annoyance that he had come so inopportunistly between me and the climax of my story; but his gray face scared me and his audible, shallow breathing. I did not want him to die; I did not want anyone to die; I did not want to believe in death—not just yet, not till the ironies were all worked out.

"Reach into my side pocket, boy, and give me the little box." His eyes stared at me glassily, but with a trace still of the old mockery. "Brace me against the tree and leave me alone. It's nothing, I have a little attack like this every six weeks." I gave him the box and he swallowed two tiny tablets quickly, forcing them past

his trembling, spit-flecked lips. "And stop staring at me like a peasant—I have no intention of dying tonight. The odds are better on you." He seemed a little stronger already, though he still pressed both hands against his chest. "I hope she was worth it, boy!"

Feeling guilty, I left him there, supported by the tree trunk; but when I looked around he shook his head pityingly, and began to sing to a tune of his own contriving, "What shall I do for pretty girls now my old bawd is dead!"

The crowd had moved off, but I could hear voices from the basement apartment next to the Somers's, and I rushed down the steps to find Hank just hurling Judith into the middle of the room. "This is my wife, everybody—though it's hard to tell!" He was making an effort to speak distinctly, but his voice had grown very thick, and the whites of his eyes seemed yellow in the absolute pallor of his face. "Judy likes Jews, don't you, Judy?"

"You're drunk, Hank, go to bed."

"I'm going to bed, Judy, but first gotta find you a niceil Jew. No use being lonely lossa Jews around. Where did all the god-damn Jews go?" He looked about wildly, and Herb Ginsburg stepped out of the group against the farthest wall.

"Cut it out, Hank," he said in his mild, piping voice. "You'll just be sorry in the morning."

"Here's niceil Jew for you," Hank cried triumphantly, grabbing Herb by the arm and pushing him up against Judith. "Howdyou like this one—you like Jews so god-damn much." He pushed Herb away from him in sudden anger. "Hate your Jew face and your Jew heart. Whatchagonnado about it!"

"Now cut it out, Hank." He was not afraid, merely ineffectual and aware of it; but he looked back at Hank without rancor.

"Don' like my wife, do you? Think 'snot good enough for a god-damn Jew. Show you who's good enough!" He swung a long slow blow in Herb's direction, his whole furious unbalanced body behind it. Someone screamed, but it landed no place and, baffled, he wheeled around to face the lookers-on. "Who wantsa fight for the Jews? Who wantsa fight?"

Each time he had said "Jew," my heart had leaped with the old

blind surge of fear and fury, and I could have wept at the thought that I had unleashed that ancient terror, that he was striking at me through the caricature of Herb Ginsburg—at my insolent, loved face through that long-nosed, bespectacled, mournfully comic mask. I walked into the circle to touch Hank on the arm, unsure of what I would say until the words were out of my mouth; but it was my party and I had to end it. I don't think I was at all afraid.

"Come on, Hank."

He half-turned, looking at me uncertainly for a moment, in a silence as blunt and sudden as a shout. One balled fist was still poised, and his huge body tilted crazily over my own short, slight figure; then, putting an arm around one shoulder and leaning his weight on me like a trustful child, he said in a little voice, "I'll come, Amsterdam. I like you."

"Let's get some air."

He must have lost consciousness completely as we climbed the steps, for the sag of his body nearly pulled me over; but his embrace did not loosen. As we passed the tree, I could see Fenton, much recovered now, shaking all the beer cans within reach to see if one still gurgled. "Bloom and Stephen," he cried in a loud, curious voice. "You can't tell the players without a program." There was no malice in his glance, only pleasure; and I knew he thought that I had laid Judith, was going to fight Hank. I had misunderstood him all along; he had not hated me at all, only wanted me to deserve the summer's admiration, to exploit it as he would have thirty years before.

"Bloom and Stephen," he cried again, evoking sentimentally the image of fatherhood that I did not resent. "Take it easy, son!" He had found a not-quite-empty can, and was pouring the warm slops into his mouth, wiping his untidy beard with one arm.

"Got sit down," Hank said suddenly, lurching forward so far that his head almost hit the ground. I steered him around the corner, and eased him down onto the curbstone, sitting myself beside him as a prop. His arm had never relaxed its hold.

"Judy sno damn good." It was hard for him to make the sounds.

"To hell with Judy. You have your work, your poems—a daughter. Forget it!"

"Sno damn good." Nothing showed through his eyes any longer, absolutely nothing.

"Listen!" I said, though I was sure that he was not registering—just for the record. "You may not remember this, but she's going to destroy you. She doesn't *want* to destroy you, she just has to. There are some women who take a man's balls away and they can't help it." I was explaining, I guess, chiefly to myself, not knowing I did not believe it. "She has to suck you in like a vacuum cleaner, because she's a vacuum cleaner. It's simple."

"God-damn milking machine," he added with appalling aptness, making in the air the motions of a machine gone mad, pulling senselessly at exhausted udders, unable to stop. Finally his hands fell into his lap. "Milking machine," he said again with great effort.

We sat in silence for a long time looking into the empty, dry gutter until I thought Hank was asleep; but he turned to me slowly at last, putting a large hand on each of my shoulders: "Listen Amsterdam I love you more than Judy can more than Judy!" In the pauses between words he seemed to doze off, rousing himself with a special act of will each time, as if this were the whole point of everything, and for that instant, I tried to believe it was. This was the final triumph, to be loved by the man I had worst offended—the triumph of love. But I wanted more.

"Hank, can you understand me?"

"Understand."

"You have to apologize—to Herb Ginsburg, to everyone—" I did not want to say the word "Jew."

"Did I hurt him? Hurt him?" He was half-sobbing. "God-damn sorry, Amsterdam."

I heaved him up by the arm and led him back down into the lighted basement room, where everyone still sat in the same place, as if held there by a spell until our return.

"Wanta apolo—gize." Hank lurched and I put an arm around him again, trying not to look smug. It was a wonder he could stand at all; but he was immensely strong. "Herb—sorry!"

"That's O.K., Hank. You're drunk, and when a fellow's drunk—"

"No. Love the god-damn Jews and I'm mashamed, mashamed." He stumbled over toward Herb, dragging me with him, and clasped him to his free side. "Veryvery sorry."

"Come to bed, dear." Judith moved slowly toward Hank, looking at me the whole time, grateful and dazzled and soft. I could feel myself preening for her and for the rest who stared uncomfortably at the four of us in the center of the floor. I regretted only that Fenton seemed to have left.

"Jesus," Herb protested in his eunuch's voice, "it's enough already. Whose idea was this anyway?" He looked at me with visible contempt. "The guy's drunk. And God knows he had provocation. Enough already!"

"It was his own idea," I lied. "He'll feel better tomorrow if he gets it off his chest." I wished in my heart that Hank had smashed in Herb's supercilious face, breaking the glasses, splintering that insolent, greasy nose.

"I can't stand it," Herb kept protesting. "He had provocation. Enough is enough," but Hank was moving inexorably from one person to another, shaking every embarrassed hand in the room. He would look back over his shoulder at me each time, for approval and encouragement.

Finally he was through, and I said into the silence, "Let's go!"

"About time!" Herb exclaimed.

"Go!" Hank answered. "Herb come, too."

All four of us climbed painfully up one short flight of steps, and down the other next door. The baby was screaming relentlessly, hoarse and too tired to stop; but she smiled and said da-da when Judith took her in her arms.

"Silly girl," she explained, "she calls me da-da. Poor abandoned darling!"

"C'min anhavea drink!"

"There's nothing to drink, dear," Judith objected. "Please go to bed!"

"Shutup." He said it mildly but firmly. "Have a drink anyway!" It must have been intended for a joke, because he tried to laugh. Once in his own house, he seemed much less drunk, and I wondered if he hadn't been shamming a little, *using* his drunkenness.

"Poor dear," Judith said, reaching out one hand to stroke his hair. "He won't remember a thing in the morning."

"Let's only hope so," Herb put in.

"Don't touch me and shutup. Amsterdam, les talk. Don't leamme alone. Christ, don't leamme alone." He shuddered under his wife's hand, moving across the room in my direction as if in search of asylum.

"Sure, let's talk," I said. "But about what? Sandburg?"

"You're a strong libbastard, Amsterdam. You carried me. Weigh hunneranninety pounds."

Judith had gone into the kitchen alcove to prepare a bottle for the baby, and stumbling across the room, Hank pulled to the curtain, winking at me in complicity.

"Les wrestle, Amsterdam. See how strong."

"Why don't you get some sleep, Hank. You need it." Herb reached out a hand toward him, but did not quite touch him. "You're strong, too. *Everybody's* strong." He turned to me with a look of hostility before which I almost flinched. "Jesus, Mr. Amsterdam, he's drunk as hell!"

"Gooboy, Herb. We're pals."

"Sure thing, Hank," Herb answered without conviction.

"Les wrestle, Amsterdam." He grabbed my right arm with one hand, and crooking the other elbow over and around my neck, tried to force me to the ground. Even drunk, he was powerful, and I could feel myself giving at the knees. Without really thinking, I put a shoulder into his belly and flipped him backwards and to the right, so that he landed sitting down. I have learned a little judo from the boys at the school; and though I am not very apt, with someone as slowed in his reactions as Hank, it is easy to look good.

He charged back again, not knowing what had happened, and this time I tossed him to the left, while he yelled incredulously, "Look, Judy, he's throwing me. He's beating me! He's beating me!"

It was a cry of pure joy, and suddenly I could stand it no longer. Our whole cloying, ambiguous relationship disgusted me; and it seemed to me that I must *really* fight him, show him I could hurt

him even on his own terms—anti-Semite and quasi-cuckold and slobbering lush! I moved in fast now, grabbing him before he could brace himself, and heaved him over my shoulder so that he flew through the air halfway across the room, landing with the limp thud of a drunk. "Wouldn't believe it," he muttered, his head against the edge of the couch, "wouldn't—" and he was asleep.

I looked around proudly as if for applause, feeling myself the champion of my woman, the defender of the Jews! But Judith in the archway was intent on burping the baby, mumbling as she gently thumped its back, "He won't remember a thing in the morning!" She apparently found real comfort in the thought, an assurance that in some sense nothing had happened at all. And when I turned to Herb, I found him watching me, not only with contempt as before, but with fear—as if, after all, I were not really a Jew.

"I'm going," he said, deliberately avoiding my eyes. "I'll wait for you outside, Mr. Amsterdam, with my jalopy."

I knew that he would not be there, that I would never see him again, and I wanted to explain to him the nobility of my motives before he escaped; but all I could manage to say was, "Outside," as I waved him a vague farewell. Somewhere, somehow, I knew, I had done something wrong; but I could not think what in my weariness and the unbroken heat.

"Here," Judith said into the embarrassed silence that followed. "Hold her! She's so *cute!* I want her to like you. I want her to marry someone like you. I want her to be *happy*. Everyone has a right to be happy, Milton, don't they? Well, *don't* they?"

I took the baby into my arms awkwardly, and she began to cry, pushing at me furiously with her tiny hands. "She doesn't like me," I said, a little mournfully.

"She's upset, poor thing. She's been teething. Oh, *Milton!*" Judith flung her arms around my neck, resting her head, under its golden burden of hair, against my right shoulder, while the baby squirmed uncomfortably against my other. I had not known infants were so heavy.

"Tell me the truth, darling. When you didn't—when you

couldn't—I mean in bed, when you—It was *really* your wife, wasn't it?" Her refusal to call my impotence by its proper name irked me. "I mean, it wasn't that I didn't attract you, that you didn't *like* me at all? It was your wife!"

"I don't have a wife," I cried in an impatience to be through with all lies. It seemed to me that even yet, at the very last moment, everything might be saved. "The one I had until three months ago, I hate, do you understand, *hate!* And I don't have seven children. I don't have any children! It was all a stupid joke!" I thrust the baby back at her for emphasis, and she folded it, screaming in terror now, into her arms.

"Oh, darling," she moaned, "what's the matter with me, what's the matter? First Hank and then you! I'm young, I'm pretty. What do I *do* to people?" How much she believed of what I had told her was not clear; but she sensed certainly that I wanted to hurt her. "You hate me, too. Don't deny it! You and Hank sneaking off together. What's the *matter* with me?"

Her eyes widened dreadfully, not in fury but in fear, the insides of them going to pieces, the centers sucked down into some interior vortex of wetness and dark; and her fingers plucked senselessly at the folds of her skirt. "I hate myself! I don't want to live! I don't want to *live*, do you understand me? I *hate* myself, and oh, I'm scared, Milton, I'm scared!"

She clutched me again, the sobbing baby between us unnoticed, even Hank forgotten, though we were standing now between his limp legs; and he turned slightly, moaning a little, as if her cries had reached him. I could feel her uncontrollable trembling against me, her whole body like the frantic nerve that twitches inexorably in arm or thigh. "I don't know what's happening. I've never been so scared. Why am I so *scared!*!"

Hank was trying to call out something in his sleep. "Mama," he seemed to be saying softly, "Mama!" like a child half waked out of a nightmare. But I could not be sure.

There was no use. I kissed her on the forehead, on the eyes, very gently on the mouth. "I like you, Judith. I like you a lot. It's just that—" I did not know when I started how I would finish the sentence, but it came to me all at once, the final lie. "It's just that I've

never slept with a gentile girl before—and—I've heard of such things, but I never believed it—Something in me deeper than desire or love, something in the blood—refused, refused!"

"Oh my darling," she sobbed, "you do like me, you *do!* My poor Milton, my poor, *poor* Jew."

When I got outside there was no one in sight, and I watched alone the dawn coming drably over the empty beer cans and the clothespoles and the deserted street. It was then that my desire flowed back into me, idiotically, uncomfortably, to the crowing of the first cocks; and I hobbled down the street, pointing my own way home and feeling for the first time that summer almost cold.

The Stain

T

he merest nuance of morning lay on the stone walls or glittered in the faint pools left by the early sweepers. They had come before dawn carrying lanterns, and each man in his own flickering circle of light had flushed the ancient pavement from his tilted bucket, scrubbed away at the irremediable stain. They could not see each other, but each bowed toward his trembling shadow could hear the hushed broom of his closest neighbor, insistent or stuttering on the mossy stone. When one dared to rise, in weariness or dismay, before the signal that would release them all, the voice of the Captain of the Guard, unseen but alert in his lofty embrasure, would cry through the dim silence, "*Lay to! Lay to! Break your backs!*"

But the pavement could, of course, never be cleaned. Daylight would discover the stain, as had the uncounted daylights before, stubborn though mottled by water drying unevenly in rise and hollow—brown, brown-red, red—the stain of blood. It would have

in the earliest light a certain beauty that the sweepers could not have foreseen.

Before the fathers of these sweepers had been born or the fathers of their fathers, the stain and the stone had long been one, had become a legend. Tourists, children, recluses dying in dark houses they had never left somehow knew of it. Even those who had not crossed the outer moat (on the eves of the two great National Holidays, boats bearing candles on their high prows would carry crowds across the murky waters to gawk before the inscrutable inner walls or to mumble the traditional prayers in a tongue no longer understood) could evoke the very color, the odor of that sullied pavement. And yet it could not be said that anyone *spoke* of it ever. Only from time to time, behind closed blinds, a lonely rebel might perhaps cry out there had never been a stain!

Astonishingly enough, no one had seemed horrified when, just after the Revolution, the New Regime had decreed its cleaning. Indeed, there had been a certain elation, a sense of daring in seeing the slogan on posters: WIPE OUT OUR ANCIENT STAIN! or merely in discussing with one's neighbor the progress of the campaign. Mothers and fathers would stop before the hoardings with their young children, teaching them to spell out the word "S-T-A-I-N," proud that for a new generation the unspeakable would become merely five ordinary letters, almost lost among other appeals to SAVE FAT FOR FREEDOM! or LOVE AUSTERITY MORE!

Sweepers had volunteered at first, long lines standing each day before the gaily-colored enlistment booths set up against the outermost walls. Not the rudeness of the recruiting sergeants, nor the terrible sun that struck in full insolence that treeless square had been able to discourage the young men, who would wait with a terrible patience, chewing gum, jostling each other good-humoredly, and drawing obscene pictures on the whitewashed walls for the benefit of the young girls who passed on their way to or from school. Not even when the guards, for reasons never clear to anyone, began to impose silence, rapping those who spoke or moved across the nape of the neck with their short flexible batons, did the lines visibly diminish.

But as day after day new sweepers were chosen, the tallest and the most visibly reckless, and were not again seen, rumors grew and from the rumors—panic! Fewer and fewer stood before the booths, whose bright colors had faded in the unremitting sun, and whose pennants had flapped themselves to tatters in the summer westerlies. At last, each day brought only a handful of old men, rummies unaccustomed to daylight, their faces dazzled with hope (agents of the Regime, it was said, circulated among the more dismal bars, whispering of inexhaustible grog rations), and small boys who would run through the legs of the Guards, shouting insults and dodging the flailing sticks.

In the end, sweepers had had to be drafted. It was at first scarcely noticed. There was no publicity, of course, and only six were chosen each day—for a long time men without family or position, and from widely scattered precincts of the city. But when fathers of families began to be called up, when the postman did not appear or the hawker of balloons, and no one knew, or dared seem to know, why—in darkened houses, and on hushed corners, one spoke his surmise to another. At last, everyone somehow *knew*: Each day new sweepers were called up and when they had failed were killed, each on the spot he had futilely swabbed. The bodies lay, it was whispered, until dusk, the blood soaking into the rock, mocking their failure, confirming the ancient stain.

Somehow the terrible knowledge brought a resurgence of faith, almost revivalistic in intensity, in the New Regime, though there was little bread and trains rusted on the lines that could not be kept open. Birds nested in the silent machines of the great mills, and the children ran from garbage heap to garbage heap like hungry dogs. But at the great open-air meetings in the plazas, the Block Leaders rushing incredulously from group to group found real tears of joy in every eye; and the People's Songs everyone had resisted learning for so long leapt as if alive toward the Chairman of the Presidium, puzzled behind the few public emotions his face could afford.

It was as if everyone were a soldier, more purely, more absolutely than in any war the country had known. Alone, of course, each was afraid to die; but together their fear was an ecstasy. The

stain was no longer mentioned. The posters came down, and the revolutionary books that had called for its abolition were secretly burned, their authors discreetly removed to the provinces. Meanwhile, each day six more men would disappear some time between midnight and dawn, while the whole ravaged city trembled with delight.

Ham bent now, knowing all this but scarcely daring to think it, over his moving broom that inch by inch scrubbed the circle his lantern defined. What had been a legendary fear had become, astonishingly, his *there-ness*, the noise of bristles and water over the bearded stone, the pointless motion that somehow pleased him; his last pleasure, he told himself, not yet really believing it. The rap at his door, the official cry of warning, the brief pulling on of clothes and the silent ride through the lightless city (the convention of a hundred movies from which surely he would rise, he had assured himself without conviction) had brought him to this moment, wet underfoot and waiting for the dawn. He had not even been able to muster the terror proper to the occasion, and he had felt through it all somehow shamed by his own apathy.

It had still been dark when an unseen speaker had bellowed from above, "*Sweepers, man your brooms!*" and Ham had stumbled forward under the hand of a guard until a whispered "*Stop!*" had brought him up sharp somewhere in the black courtyard. For a moment, the unseen hand had pressed his arm in secret sympathy, sensing, it seemed to him, the pathos of his lastness, and a voice at his ear had breathed, "*Now!*" gently, preparing him for the brazen shout from above, "*Clean sweep down fore and aft!*"

The dawn had come uncertainly behind a faltering breeze, snuffing the lanterns' ruddiness, revealing the shadowy guards, shoulder to shoulder against the courtyard wall, and the six sweepers not daring to look up, each bowed to the faint glitter of his pool. The spaces separating them were immense and seemed to grow with the light's growing. Yet between brushstrokes they could hear each other's breathing.

"*Sweepers, rest your brooms!*" The command they had awaited surprised them, and they dropped their brooms one by one to the steaming pavement, a prolonged stutter. "Guard detail, forward

harch!" About each sweeper, eight men formed a square, three right, three left, one before, one behind. The breaths of the guards steamed in twin streams from their nostrils against the stagnant cold, giving them the air of barnyard beasts awaiting their morning feeding. Their backs, their muscled shoulders bulged perilously against the taut tunics, damp with the first dew; and on each hostile shoulder, the aegis of the Regime gleamed strangely in the small light.

Dawn came red at first, violent and catholic, subduing everything to a single hue: pavement and wall, sweeper and soldier, even the Captain of the Guard, who had descended from the watchtower and moved slowly among the sweepers, peering myopically into each bowed face. It seemed not pride which had led him to eschew glasses, but the same modesty which motivated his uniform without chevrons or braid. When he raised his great head, it looked haggard, ruined by an impotent pity.

As the last red faded from the light, and the sun stood just over the east bastion, he motioned toward the door of the tower, from which, with some pomposity, a young officer came to join him, pencil and pad in hand. In his own hand, the Captain of the Guard held a small device through which, deliberately and with an immense show of care, he scrutinized the pavement before each of the sweepers, calling over his shoulder in a just audible tone: "Number one: three-point-five. No significant alteration. Number two: three-point-eight. No significant alteration." Ham was number five, and as he strove desperately to think nothing lest he pray to a God in whom he had never believed for a miracle, the Captain called softly, the young officer inscribed, "No significant alteration."

After all six areas had been tested, the Captain turned to the sweepers with a shrug which seemed intended to mean that against hopeless odds he had done his duty, that without irony or self-deceit he had observed due form—and he re-entered the tower. He reappeared (they had heard his hobnail boots on the stone steps) upon a small balcony, some ten feet above their heads. Making perfunctorily the salute that from anyone but the Chair-

man of the Presidium seemed a parody, he began: "Citizens: It was our immemorial— We had long been told by defeatists that some things are— The point is not to discuss, but to change the— You as loyal patriots are aware that the whole imperialist world is— But objective historical conditions must— It is your duty, your sacred— Inadmissible— This secret, as it must, will die with you; and therefore I do not demand but *accept* your will, foreknown to me though not to you—" (Had he winked shamelessly like a child, or was it a trick of the sun?) "to vote unanimously your own immediate executions!"

He had left each of his sentences, except for the last, unfinished, half in embarrassment at the absurdity of the situation, half in a cynical camaraderie that they could appreciate, he afford in that futureless place. They had read the phrases countless times in the newspapers and in pamphlets, had heard them over and over from platforms and on the radio. These had become their ritual and the definition of an ennui more terrible than slavery, from which only the knowledge of the stain and of death had been able to deliver them. Ham felt deeply moved at the speech, grateful that for once at least before the end, he should be so honored, spared the insult of the explicit. But at the conclusion of the remarks he rebelled.

"This is no *secret*," he wanted to cry aloud. "Everyone knows that the stain remains. . . . Everyone! It is only for this that we love you, only for this we forgive the loudspeakers and the uniforms. There is no need for us to die, no sense in it. Each death only confirms the ancient spot."

But he did not speak, for he knew suddenly that he was dreaming, *only*, he thought with inexplicable anguish, dreaming, and he could wake when he chose. He felt a great pity for his fading terror and for those creatures who would die with it. Already he had begun to have a sense of his real body, twitching between the warm, rumpled sheets; and his dream form began to tug out of its frame, contemptuous of that world's gravity and fate.

Yet when the Captain had bowed to them in conclusion, and they had cried in concert, "*Death to us! Death to those who know!*" and the drums, hidden somewhere in the tower, had be-

gun their rolling; when in each squad one man had cried cadence against the morning: *Hump-hulla-hup-hup! Hump-hulla-hup-hup!* fear took Ham again. It was perhaps no dream after all; how could one ever be sure. But he could feel clearly now the weight of his shifting body, and his dream form pulled upward, tugging like a disturbed candle flame, in his desire to wake. *Hump-hulla-hup-hup! Hump-hulla-hup-hup!* They were being marched toward the west wall against which they would be shot, the sun in their eyes, and he knew that, dreaming or not, *he must not keep step with his executioners!* The others, who would never wake, marched in time with their guards, some in open enthusiasm, others indifferently or with a complicity too devious for thought; but he would not. He would not!

Hump-hulla-hup-hup! Hump-hulla-hup-hup! Someone was screaming the cadence in his ear, and then they had all taken it up—guards and fellow-prisoners, sensing his terrible disaffection. *Hump-hulla-hup-hup! Hump-hulla-hup-hup!* The feet beside him, the earth itself took up the beat. He forced himself to stumble, to limp, but the drums grew in intensity; the voices clamored louder, louder; the huge brogans on all sides of him insisted, insisted. In another moment—

Ham was lying in the half-darkness, panting, wet with sweat, the sound of his own heart loud and alien in his ears, and his dangling right hand just touching the packed earth beside him. He knew instantly, without the usual pang of confusion, where he was. Around him the other men were stirring, the whole long tent that sharpened slowly in the focus of returning awareness, waking with him. He looked about, feeling toward the most despicable of his tentmates love and gratitude simply for being *real*.

I am awake, he half-whispered, it *has* after all been a dream. From the bunk overhead, someone leaped to the earthen floor with a great thwack of bare feet, setting the sausages that hung from the roof pole swaying crazily. He had forgotten to what he must awake, pressing upward out of his dream as if waking were an absolute good. And he returned with a faint tremor of disgust to the long rows of smoked meat oscillating with every move-

ment below, to the wicker baskets of food stacked three deep along the tent walls.

All his comrades were sons of farmers, rich peasants to whom famine was the only terror, and every week huge crates of sausages and cheeses would arrive from their homes. Attached to each basket would be a note written by the local priest, which Ham would have to read to them. Helpless and suspicious in their illiteracy, they would watch his lips in silence as he spoke the platitudes of encouragement and blessing. They did not really believe that the words he read were anything but his own invention; yet they were somehow soothed by his performance, and as they listened, their great, cracked hands would caress the rinds of the fat cheeses, the taut casings of the sausages with a kind of clumsy, idyllic sexuality.

The overwhelming sense of food, the heavy aroma of gluttony and decay nauseated him. He wished bitterly that the Sergeant would do his simple duty and clear out the hopeless accumulation that could never be consumed. It had been sent, everyone knew, not for need but in love, and to have thrown it out would have been for the sentimental louts with whom he lived an unthinkable treason. So, it remained—a mountain of food, half-eaten or untouched, growing a scurf of iridescent mold, like the illustrations of skin diseases Ham had pored over as a boy in the *Handy Home Doctor*. But the Sergeant, bribed with liverwurst and Edam, shamelessly ignored the rotting food on his daily round of inspection.

It was the Sergeant's head, heavy with sleep and the habit of indignation, that roared now through the tent flap, "Rise and shine, you knotheads. Special detail this morning!"

Only then Ham remembered his dream and knew why he had dreamed it; and he took his rifle almost in horror upon his knees, cradling it against his heart, as if it and not he would bear the shame and guilt of shooting down a man to the cold command. It would be Ham's first time on a firing squad, and for an instant he almost wished he were indeed the victim he had dreamed himself and not the awakened executioner.

"You!" screamed the Sergeant, bearing down on Ham, heedless

of the flapping sausages, and forgetting as always his name. "Dumbo! Don't point that gun at nobody you don't want to kill!"

The huge, half-dressed men bellowed with laughter at the familiar witticism, jabbing each other with their horny elbows and rolling back and forth on their bunks until the frames trembled under them, and the great hanging salamis quivered and slapped against one another in a senseless palsy.

"He'll be pointing it for keeps pretty soon, all right," someone shouted.

"And don't miss neither," someone else advised him.

"Aw, they'll give him another chance!"

"Lucky duck," his bunkmate said. "The other guy can't shoot back."

Each new sally had been greeted with guffaws, as they had joined together to revenge on Ham his insulting literacy; and the *wurst* had continued to move in a decrescendo of spasms and tics, a chorus line of dropsical limbs. But Ham had said nothing.

He had killed, he supposed (in the haze, the waiting for commands and among the cries of the wounded, one could never be sure), three, maybe four men in combat, but they had been the Enemy, and he had not even seen them. Today he would have to shoot, in the morning brightness, at twenty paces and to a count, one of their own deserters, a man he had known dimly, though he had not been able just then to recall his name. He could only remember having stood beside the deserter two or three times at the canteen, and just once having watched him, through the smoke of his own first cigarette, go out with the morning patrol.

"Look alive, knothead," the Sergeant cried at him, and he realized that he stood now absently in his drawers, his pants in one hand.

Trembling, Ham scrambled into his uniform, while the Sergeant slouched against a tent pole insolently chewing a thick slab of bologna he had cut down from overhead with his pocketknife, wiping the greasy blade on his pants. The war had been going on for so long that matters of dress and decorum no longer mattered. Their tunics had all become crusted with grease, dribbled with

tobacco juice; and even on parade their gray underwear would show through the gaps left by fallen buttons no one troubled to sew on.

But just then the Lieutenant burst in, a new lieutenant direct from the Academy, assigned by God knows what spite or mischance to their outfit, whose very name was a joke, and to which ordinarily only the half-mad or the impossibly stupid were sent to die. Their first Commanding Officer had never emerged from his quarters, had died screaming under the table, on which through the window they had sometimes glimpsed him moving pins across a map of his native terrain, lost terribly in the almost forgotten first weeks of the war. No one of them had yet seen the new lieutenant at close range, and they scarcely believed the evidence of his cleanliness—the polished boots and scabbard, the scrubbed girlish face—as he stamped in infantile fury at the entrance to the tent, a small man with bloodless lips.

"This— This—" he stuttered in rage, pointing to the disarray about him. "This—"

"Ten-shun!" the Sergeant shouted in muffled despair, and the men froze in their places, slapping their hairy arms to their sides in desperate imitation of movies remembered from their childhood.

"Get this garbage out, you miserable peons! Out! Out!" the little lieutenant cried in a melodramatic falsetto, like the jilted woman in a play. "And YOU!" He had turned on the Sergeant. "You swine! I'll break you! I'll have your stripes! I'll—"

He pulled his saber from the filigreed scabbard and thrust frantically against the dangling meat that thrust back at him from all sides, almost upsetting him. Occasionally he would strike home and the ripped sausage would drip goblets of rancid fat onto the packed earth floor. "Insolence! Asininity! Provocation!" He slashed madly about him, tripping and recovering himself, from time to time cutting one of the men across the shoulder or cheek at the end of a wild swing; but they did not dare to speak or move, staring dumbly through the film of blood and sweat, in each face the mouth and eyes three unmeaning O's.

At last, exhausted and twitching compulsively, he stopped be-

fore Ham, whom he appeared to notice for the first time. "Stein," he shouted in apparent terror. "My God, Stein!" It was, Ham remembered then, the name of the man who was to be shot that morning, and he could not help giggling at the absurd confusion.

"I am not Stein, sir," Ham began. "Beg to report, sir, I am—" but he knew suddenly that it was "*stain*" the Lieutenant was crying over and over as if he could not stop, "*stain! stain! stain!*" And looking down horrified, he saw across the breast of his tunic, along both arms and down over his hands the spreading stain—brown, red-brown, red—the color of that ancient stone.

I have not awakened, Ham thought with relief and fear strangely mingled; it is another dream or the same. And he began to rise slowly, ballooning above the scared Lieutenant, the disemboweled sausages, the tent. "Wake!" he told himself. "For God's sake, wake!" But a monstrous pressure bore him down toward the horror of sleep, and how far upward was morning he had no way of knowing. He had the sense of thrusting terribly from a great depth against the underside of some surface tension that would bulge but not break. His head, his stomach ached with the struggle against the invisible, diffuse toughness.

For a limitless moment of despair, he thought: perhaps I shall not be able to—and then it became a matter of simply forcing open his reluctant eyes. He could hear dimly the springs creaking under him as he thrashed back and forth across the bed. Three times he dreamed that he had opened his eyes, but this time he would not be deceived. He insisted upon the circumstance of his own room, not the fantasies of half-forgotten childhood bedrooms with which his stubborn sleep tried to bribe him back to new possibilities of deceit.

Why am I so afraid to wake, he asked himself, and with the question he was at last free—*really* awake, he knew with a sudden inexplicable falling of the heart.

Through his window, Ham could see without moving his head the dead wisteria vine on the blank wall which was their only prospect. The wall had been whitewashed once, but now lime-flakes merely pocked the sombre brick. As he lay there, unwilling

to rise, to accept finally the fact of daylight, and yet afraid of lapsing again into the random terrors of night, he saw the first sun burst full upon the court he indolently watched. He had forgotten, as always, how it would come, turning the tiny scabs of lime into a tracery of foam on a great wash of golden sea, and making a yellow flush of improbable bloom on the barren vine. He reached out without turning to touch his wife on the shoulder, to rouse her before the instant was lost.

He would not have the words for what he felt; he talked little any more, and even in his political days he had been able to find words only for the most abstract notions. With him the business of seeing always exceeded the possibilities of saying; but his wife would know. "Look!" he would tell her. "There! Like waves! Like flowers." And between them, for all their differences, a sufficient poetry would be achieved. But the pillow beside him was empty.

It was Thursday, he realized then, her early day, and she must already have left for work, moving quietly as he could never move, never want to move. He knew how she had watched him from the doorway, with that tenderness and that weariness of being tender which he had surprised once, peeking at her from under his half-closed eyelids, like an observed child pretending to be asleep. He had had to find out—what exactly he could not have explained, but something that, after all, even her unguarded look had not betrayed.

He had awakened five minutes before the shrill of the alarm she had set before going out. With a tentative morning stirring of the flesh, he imagined her as she must have seemed bent over to place the clock beside him, the single color of her dark hair and eyes and the ratty fur of her coat collar. Her mouth would have been open slightly, the tip of her tongue protruding between her teeth in the effort of not waking him. It shamed him to think that he had, under his continuing love, grown to hate her a little, as a man has the right to hate only himself—for being year after year simply what she was, for having grown older.

He reached a long arm toward the floor, feeling for the clock, and pressed down the alarm button. It was time to slough off tenderness and regret, as he had already sloughed off sleep. A

moment to taste the residue of night in his mouth, to think remotely: I have been dreaming—what? what? and he stumbled across the floor to the sink. What had moved him in the long darkness no longer mattered. Only the splinter he picked up in his foot mattered. Standing on one leg, he turned up his pale horny sole awkwardly in one hand, and plucked from it with his long nails the gray sliver. No blood came.

He should, he supposed, do something about the floor, but he had been supposing that for so long that the thought came without conviction in weary self-mockery. At least in the old days, the chores, the necessary tinkering left undone, had been ignored on principle, for the sake of activities that would, my God, change the world!

Washrag in hand, he scrubbed at the fogged taps, the gray porcelain of the sink, before washing himself, but the worn surface refused to look clean. He flung the rag down into the basin in a ridiculous fury. The total grayness of the room appalled him—the paintless floor, the lusterless faucets, the dark spot of damp on the further wall, like the black irregular heart of Africa in the old geography book his mother had brought home to them with the other trash she was always carrying away, with disproportionate gratitude, from one or another of her jobs.

The schoolbook, battered to begin with, had fallen apart under his handling, but he had never forgotten the central blotch of blackness in the heart-shaped continent, and the legend: UNEXPLORED. When Ham had got old enough to “take up” Africa in school, the unknown had no longer blotted the map’s center with its dark appeal; but all had turned green and pink and yellow under the neat boundary lines and between the blue, blue oceans. In Ham’s world, his teacher had told him, the old, unexplored mysteries were gone. There were no more darknesses.

Balancing in one hand a cup of coffee, poured from the pot his wife had left perking on their single burner (he wanted no breakfast, but he had wished somehow to acknowledge her pains), Ham cleared a place for himself at the rickety table. Awkwardly he pushed aside the ridiculous pink runner and their few books, dust-covered and precariously piled. As he set down the

cup, a little of the coffee slopped over the rim, staining the binding of the bottom-most volume, but he did not even trouble to wipe it off. For him the books had become what they had always been for his wife—like the pink runner itself and the color reproductions of landscapes cut out of magazines and thumbtacked to the walls—a pitiful adornment of the seediness which neither of them had the time or courage to attack.

He looked at the handful of books almost hostilely: the Bible that had belonged to his mother, *Looking Backward*, *God's Angry Man*, *The Iron Heel*. Once there had been a good many more, stacked at random or open for study on the chairs, on the floor, on the bed. Most of them had been difficult political books, with graphs and statistics and words he had been proud to recognize, knowing that he could even use them correctly. But when he had finally left the Movement—it was better to say it, when he had been expelled from the Party—he had given away a few, burned the rest.

At the bottom of the pitiful pile, the remnant saved for reasons he could not recall, Ham discovered the Dream Book he thought his wife had thrown away years before. They had had a terrible fight about it, for it had been his first year as branch organizer and he had felt shamed at not being able to stamp out “the bondage of superstition” in his own house, the house of a Bolshevik. His wife had wept and promised and wept again; the book would be thrown away. It did not surprise him that, after all, she had lied. It was only strange that it no longer mattered. “The bondage of superstition!”

He set the cooling cup of coffee, still three-quarters full, carefully down so that it covered the head in a witch’s cap on the frayed cover. A Dream Book! He was oppressed with the sense of something to be remembered.

At the door, he sniffed the armpits of his shirt in vague disgust, deciding that tomorrow he would change. He had once liked the smell of his own body, he recalled incredulously; he had enjoyed his own savor, sweating in work or in the act of love. He would change tomorrow. He could scarcely recall having dressed.

On the street (Ham had chosen to walk rather than ride the crowded streetcar, for it was early and the May sun had laid a tolerable, pale warmth over everything), he tried to whistle, but the only tune he could call up was an odd melancholy fragment of a song he had once heard in a Russian movie. I shall never know the meaning of the words, he thought, dimly saddened.

And in that instant, the whole sequence of the film had returned to him, without effort or desire: a shepherd boy in his fur cap singing into the long meadow, and the sky full of tattered clouds alive with the sad sweep of the steppe wind that had seemed to shake even the makeshift screen itself in the hired loft where he had sat with the other Party functionaries in the first row. It had been a Benefit—for what lost battle or dead victim?

It was ridiculous to remember so vividly from his political days only such trivial scenes; all the rest had become to him vague and abstract, though in his living of them, those years had seemed the densest, the most *lived* of his life. Perhaps it was the very substantiality of the past that made it so difficult to recapture now in a thin, eventless time.

The fraction meetings, the caucuses and conventions were gone like a dream from which one has been too suddenly awakened. He had even lost the feel of those speeches in the park, when he had stood in the evenings, a hundred people hushed below him, released from their day's work to the consolation of his rhetoric. He had watched them moving to the rhythm of his breath, to the slightest gesture of his hand, until he had known that he could lift them with him, whenever he chose, into that world without blemish or war that he dreamed aloud over their heads. Sometimes calls of encouragement would come to him from the packed faces at his feet, inarticulate affirmative grunts or a voice yelling, "Now you're talkin', brother, keep right on talkin'!" He could not remember those moments actually, only the telling about them later to Marie and their laughing together over the splendor and absurdity of it all. It had been Marie who remembered the absurdity when he had become too lost in the splendor.

He could scarcely recall what she had looked like, the thin pale hair, the blue eyes, impossibly round, as if fixed in perpetual

fright; though he had slept with her, how often?—twice, a hundred times, who knows. His wife would have cried all night, would try to stifle her sobs as he rolled into bed beside her toward morning. Though she had made the gesture of joining the Party, his wife had never understood the new morality, the promise of freedom from fear and convention that might have been hers, too, if she had only been willing to reach out, like him or Marie.

It was Marie's suicide that had turned him away from the Movement. She had been expelled from the Party for going to an analyst, and she had killed herself. "We warned her many times. It wasn't the first offense," the Comrades had explained to him afterwards, "and there's no *necessary* connection. A neurotic, petty-bourgeois type, what do you expect?"

It was not that he had been sure of any "necessary" connection between her expulsion and her death; he had not even wanted to be sure; for he had voted along with the rest to expel her, knowing discipline to be more important than desire. It had been easy enough to talk of the death of a world, of a class he scarcely knew—but to admit oneself the executioner, not in metaphor but in fact, and of Marie! It was not even that he had loved her; he knew, he *knew* that he had not, not certainly as he had loved his wife. It was only—

But he really could no longer remember. He was not certain whether she had said to him once, or if he had only dreamed her saying, in the dreams he had had for so many nights after her death, "I want to be clean—to be worthy of a clean world. What's so terrible?"

Her suicide had left him sullen, suspicious of everyone, a dead weight in the Party, and they had taken care of him, as they had to, as he really had wanted them to, pleading dumbly for the *coup de grâce*. He had regretted later that it had not been a political expulsion, but he had only become aware of his political differences afterwards, when the baffled pain had stopped. They had charged him with misappropriation of funds (his accounts had always been hopelessly jumbled), with drunkenness, and the other conventional filth appropriate to a renegade. He had understood, then, that the truth of the charges didn't matter,

that it was only necessary for the good of everyone concerned to separate him, by whatever means, from the comrades who had loved and trusted him. He had not even defended himself.

After the actual leaving and the cold faces of friends turned from him on the street, there had been the matter of getting a job, and of learning to live in the room whose shabbiness he could no longer pretend was provisional, another small failure to be consumed along with the entire world by the revolutionary fire. It had been hard to confess that the job, the room were *real*—that these walls and those duties made up the actual sum of his days.

He returned with a wrench to the streets through which he walked. Children rushed past him on their erratic paths to the schoolhouse just across from the garage where he worked, screaming and tumbling against each other with the vigor no day could fulfill. The spot in his foot where the splinter had been irked him a little, but he smiled at the kids, secretly, shyly. He had no children of his own, and having for so long fiercely not wanted any, he was almost afraid to confess to himself his desire now to have sons.

There was a group of four boys just in front of him, chanting the songs kids sing, and pushing each other off the sidewalk almost into the paths of the oncoming trucks and cars. One of them began suddenly to sing in a high, clear voice, keeping time in an improvised war-dance.

Cholly Chapman went to France
To teach the ladies how to dance,
And this is what he . . .

“Oh, Cholly Chapman, Chap-MAN. Ooooh!” Another of the boys, redhead and very pale under a few freckles, flung himself to the sidewalk, rolling back and forth on his spine, back and forth, back and forth, howling in derision.

“What’s a matter, stupid?” The other three children had gathered around him, and the boy who had been singing bent over his writhing contempt, shouting into his face, “I said what’s a matter, stupid!”

But the kid on the ground could only continue to rock from side to side on the sharp ridge of his back. "Oooh! Oooh! Chapman! Chap-MAN!" he kept screaming breathlessly until he dissolved into complete incoherence. "Ooooooooh!" Ham, unnoticed, had stopped, watching them almost passionately, though he could not have said why.

"I said what's-a-matter-stupid-*what's-a-matter-stupid*-WHAT'S-A-MATTER-STUPID!" The boy being mocked reached down and tugged at the rolling body of his mocker, until he pulled his shirt loose. The belly of the prone boy shone white in the early sunlight, almost silver, it seemed to Ham, but softer.

"It's Chaplin, you dope. Chap-LIN! Didn't you ever hear of Charlie Chap-LIN. Oh, what a dope!" The two boys not immediately involved watched for a moment, unsure who was right, and then seeing the dismay of the singer, began to laugh raucously. "Oh, what a dope! *What* a dope!" They had drawn apart from the third boy, each with an arm loosely over the other's shoulders, their heads flung back, their mouths open—moist, pale red.

To Ham, short-sighted and dazzled in the morning sun, they seemed like twins, each head glowing pink in an ecstasy of scorn and pleasure; and dangling softly from each an overlong shock of pale, straight hair, scarcely distinguishable from the silver light that lay on everything in the narrow street. Like flowers, Ham told himself inadequately, like flowers; but oddly enough, it was not tenderness he felt, only an unreasonable, dull anger.

The deserted boy who had said "Chapman," threw himself with a cry on his tormentors, and, indistinguishably intertwined, they rolled now on the pavement, in a tussle that might have been an embrace. Blood showed purple where they had scraped themselves on the concrete. I have no children, Ham thought dully, I have no sons. And he told himself that this was why anger stirred in him.

Kicking their sprawling friends indifferently a couple of times, the two blond boys walked off, again arm in arm, one of them beginning to chant in a piercing treble that easily carried to Ham, even after they had crossed to the other side of the street.

*My father went to war
In nineteen forty-four*

War, Ham almost said aloud, what do you know of war? And then the absurdity of his sentimentality overcame him and he began to chuckle quietly, keeping pace with the boys on his own side of the street.

*My father went to war
In nineteen forty-four
He saw a nigger
He saw a nigger
He saw a nigger
He saw a nigger*

The thin voice persisted, echoing itself almost exactly, while the bright shaggy head moved compulsively back and forth with the repeated rhythm—the stuck needle of a phonograph.

*He saw a nigger
He saw a nigger
He saw a nigger*

The other boy reached over, touching lightly the silver head of his friend in an elaborate pantomime of releasing the tone arm. His wrist and fingers seemed to Ham translucent against the morning light.

*He saw a nig—ger
And pulled the trigger
And that was the end of the war!*

At the final words, the other two boys, whom they had left behind wrestling, catapulted into them with screams of “Hey, where you going, what’s your hurry!” and the whole group went down in a confusion of arms and legs.

But Ham no longer heard or saw them. His heart rose abruptly and he stopped to feel the blood plunging in his ears and against his temples. He had not remembered from the moment of waking until that word assailed him that he was a Negro.

He looked down at the backs of his hands: brown-black with a bluish sheen on the ridges of the knuckles, and the defining

purple shadows in the hollows between—at the paler palms: brown, brown-red, red—the stain of blood. Distressed, he stood like a snag in the eddy of children, and he cried out once recalling his double dream. Victim and executioner, among brooms and sausages, he had dreamed himself white, *white*. He felt shamed, caught out in some monstrous betrayal.

Automatically, he walked into the garage, scarcely seeing the faces of the night-shift, who grinned at him wearily as they passed; hardly hearing the usual greetings of the other men on his own shift, arriving with him from other lives that were to him no more than a half-remembered child's name or a face seen once on a snapshot. The utterly familiar smell of the hosed-down cement floor and the newly opened tins of grease, the *tink-tink-tink* of metal on metal from the underside of the automobile on the rack reached him only dimly—as he entered the parenthesis of another day.

Still trying vaguely to work out the meanings of his sense of guilt, Ham changed into his overalls, picked up his sponge and bucket and bent to the dirty side of a car. The pointless job no longer really irked him, having become a habit inside of which he could continue to live, as unconscious of the movements of his body as an infant or a saint.

It was not, he figured it out doggedly, a question of being ashamed to think of himself as a Negro, but of being in solitude, quite incapable of thinking of himself in such terms. His being, as they said, "colored" was not for *him* a fact, only for the others, the whites—and their definition he felt imposed on him from without: a distinction of fear, a discrimination of contempt: a stain. *Their* stain, he cried in his head bitterly, *their* shame!

He could see his face now in the car body that came clean under his sponge, as they must see it: the broad nose, gross lips, the tight nap of hair that even he could dream on no hero. From childhood on, his picture books, the movies had proposed to him a mythical American face, thin-nosed, smooth-haired, grayish-pink, before which he must confess his own face a failure, a blemish.

Their stain, he insisted to himself, for there is no real difference between us, nothing within which corresponds to the outer difference, only what they have invented—*their* lie. But he knew that if it were really a lie, if they were truly alike, he and those who called “nigger,” that their guilt must be his guilt, too, their stain somehow also his stain. Either the internal blackness was a human blackness, the dark failure of everybody, or else there was no stain, as the Party had taught—no stain at all.

He moved to the other side of the car with his sloshing bucket, puzzled, unwilling to think further. The image of a childhood incident came unbidden into his head: a group of white children were holding him under a spouting hydrant, trying to scrub him white. Had he wished, for all his kicking and screaming, wished for one instant as they had held him under the spray, that he might indeed be washed “clean”?

The voice of his mother mingled with the cries of the other memory, and he saw her image in the place of his own, her hand on the open pages of her Bible, her tiny head raised in the intolerable pose of prophecy she had learned from their minister. She had been terrorized by Ham’s new ideas, by his impatience and fury. “Can the leopard change his spots or the Ethiopian his skin?” “Don’t be an Uncle Tom, Ma,” he would protest, “we’re going to change the whole—” “Only sweet Jesus can help, honey, only the sweet blood of the Lamb. ‘Though your sins be as scarlet, they shall be washed as white as—’” And he would kiss her mouth shut in love and pity and contempt.

“My car ready, George?” Ham looked up out of his reverie to the off-hand assurance of the white voice calling him by the name that was not his own. They never troubled to remember that he was Ham; George or Sambo or simply Boy would do.

“Yessir,” he cried, showing his teeth in a meaningless grimace. “Yes sir. Thank you, sir!”

And he reached out for the offered coin, thinking: from this, too, I can wake. But he did not try.

Nude Croquet

Don't you ever get tired of being right!" Howard snarled ritually, jamming the brakes down hard as the house rose up from a tangle of runty pines and bushes just where Jessie had said it would be. They had been arguing for twenty minutes about the last turn, he with all the desperate passion of a man without a sense of direction.

"Won't you ever learn how to stop a car!" Jessie snapped back automatically; then, counting the seven crazy turrets, castellated and masked with iron filigree, "Seven! Bernie wasn't exaggerating for once," and at last, "I'm so damn tired of being right, I could *puke!*" She stared miserably at the bats sliding down the evening sky over the slate roofs—her face very pale in the last light. "It'll be raining in half an hour," she added. "There goes your swim."

"Don't sound so happy," he answered, cutting the motor and putting an arm around her shoulder. "Look. Let's turn right around and go home. There's no point in this whole—I mean,

what do we have in common any more, Leonard and Bill and I, except our remembered youth—and that's only a reproach. It's just that—I—" He gave up finally, waving his free hand at the grounds before them: the offensive acres of plants and flowers that neither of them could have named, the lily-infested pond barely visible beside the porte-cochere, the untidy extravagance of the great house itself.

Jessie shook herself free of his arm, and pulling her feet up under her, knelt on the seat; she thrust her face forward viciously, almost into the mirror on the sun visor above her. "I look so old—so god-damned *old!*" She touched the creases on her cheeks that had once been dimples, the vein-riddled crescents under her eyes, the ungenerous mouth that had sunk inward, pulling her nose and chin closer together.

"*You are old. We're old.* Forty-three, forty-five—that's not young. What do you want?" Howard turned slowly to look at the face he seldom saw.

"At least my hair's a good color this time." She lifted a lock of it in her bony hand—very red against the white, a splendid red, quite dark yet shot with lights even at that dim hour, just the color Howard liked. "But *you* look like a baby. It isn't fair. A spoiled baby!"

"It's worth paying a little more to get it done right. That other woman was a moron." He tried to concentrate on her hair, but could not resist glancing a little smugly at his own face in the glass, baby-pink and white under the baby-yellow curls, luxuriant and untouched by gray. His face had always been plump and never handsome, but its indestructible youthfulness had managed finally to lend it a certain charm.

"A spoiled baby—and I'm the one who spoils you. I must *want* you to look young. Why the hell do I want that, Howard, when I look like a witch? I know why *you* like it; it makes other women feel sorry for you, yoked to such a hag! But why do I want it, Howard, *why?*"

"I don't know. You're just a good American girl, I guess. All American men look younger than their wives. It's unconstitutional the other way." In the silence that followed, he could hear

the sea walloping the rocks, realized that he had been hearing it for a long time: *thump—thump—thump*. Like a man in an empty house, he thought sadly, banging a table, banging a table and shouting into the darkness that—

“Do I really look so old, Howard? *Do I?*” she interrupted. “What would you think if you just met me for the first time?”

He examined her for a moment with his careful painter’s eye. “Yes,” he answered at length, “you do.” He was quite serious; after much devious thought, he always ended up telling the truth, the simplest truth. It was a kind of laziness. “I always tell the truth,” he explained, trying to embrace her again. “It’s a kind of laziness.”

“A bon mot!” she cried bitterly, shaking off his encircling arm once more. “Save it! Save it for your friends and their twenty-year-old wives.” She tried vainly to light her cigarette at the car lighter in an intended gesture of nonchalance; and he flipped a match with finger and thumb, offered it. “Thanks for nothing.”

“Listen, Jess. I’m not kidding. Let’s turn around. It’s bound to be gruesome—six men who never loved each other to begin with, and two brand-new wives. Besides, you’re upset. We can call up later and say I got lost. Everyone knows I always get lost. Let’s keep going to Atlantic City; a man can’t die without having been in Atlantic City and this may be our only chance. The kids in camp and—To hell with Bill Ward and his caviar. We can eat salt-water taffy instead. We’ve already seen the Castle of Otranto, and so let’s—”

She had not even been listening. “I suppose you intend to play the fool again tonight the way you always do. That’s the difference between you and an ordinary fool; you always plan it in advance. Which one will you make a pass at tonight? Which twenty-year-old? Which ingénue, Molly or Eva?”

“Ay-vah,” he corrected her. “She says it ‘Ay-vah’ not ‘Eva.’ It makes Leonard mad when—”

“To hell with Leonard. He’s a worse fool than you are. Giving up a girl like Lucille for a—”

“A *girl!*”

“All right, a woman. That’s exactly my point. He turned in a

woman, who incidentally, *just* incidentally, supported him for seventeen years, for a little—”

“Please, Jess, don’t yell at me. Take it up with Leonard. I’m not the one who divorced my wife, I just said—”

“You just *said*. You just sit there preening in the mirror and thinking what-a-good-boy-am-I because you didn’t divorce your wife like Leonard or Bill. Many thanks.”

“You’re welcome.”

“Oh, no, you don’t divorce her; you only make a fool of her by slobbering over somebody else’s twenty-year-old wife, because you’re too lazy and too spoiled and too irresponsible even to be the first-class kind of bastard Leonard is. But don’t think you just make a fool out of me. You make a worse fool out of yourself. After all, you *are* forty-five, even if you do look only thirty-fourty-five and foolish and fat, just like in the comic strips.” She took the fold of fat over his belt between two fingers and pinched it hard. She was crying. “The shame of it is that it’s such a pattern, so stupid, so *expected*. Everyone knows what Howard Place, boy abstractionist, is going to do at a party, and everybody watches and waits for him to do it. Who will it be tonight? Which sleazy bitch or celebrity-happy sophomore from Bennington? And how will his gallant wife take it *this* time, brave, brave Jessie Place. Just like that time I was pregnant, eight months pregnant and you had the nerve to—”

“For God’s sake, Jess, that was fifteen years ago, fifteen. And we haven’t seen some of these people since, Marvin, for instance, and Irving. How long do you think anyone remembers—”

“But I can’t forget, Howard. I can’t.”

“All right, then, we’ll—”

“All right, then, we’ll *what*? You don’t even bother to protest any more, do you? You won’t even lie to me. At least, you used to swear that this time, next time it would be different—that *this* time you’d try. It’s the last tribute you can pay a woman, Howard—to lie to her a little, to—”

“O.K., so we won’t see the gold-plated johns and the fountain in the living room. Let’s get out of here. It’s not worth it.” Clumsily and in anger, he began to slew the car around, spinning his

back wheels on the sandy shoulders and crushing the bushes behind him.

But Jessie had changed her mood without warning, though her tears were not yet dry. "At least we can still argue. *That's* a good sign, Howard, isn't it?"

"It sure is." He kissed her tentatively.

"Then don't turn around. How can you be such a fool. Don't you think I want to see the inside of the house, too? I want it to be so vulgar and stupid that—that—well, you know—vulgar and stupid. And I can't leave without seeing that girl who's so much more 'sympathetic' than Elaine."

He heard the ironic quotes around "sympathetic." "Look, darling, I didn't mean that—"

"Oh, you poor, helpless bastard, just lie to me a little, that's all. I *love* you, you know." She leaned over to return his kiss—not very hard.

"That's just because I'm going to be in next year's Biennale. You don't want to lose a winner."

"It helps." She kissed him again, and he held her to him almost with passion.

"I love you, too, Jess. God have mercy on us." It was the simplest truth, and yet he was already thinking how Eva (Leonard's wife whom he had seen only once) and Molly (for whom Bill had left Elaine and whom he had not yet met) would be to touch or taste, their flesh not much more subdued by love or time than his fourteen-year-old daughter's. The sea grew louder and louder as he eased the car down the narrow, overgrown drive under a quarter-mile tunnel of rhododendron bushes. It was roaring now, not thumping, roaring like the coming of sleep or the reaching back to childhood. He had not swum in the Atlantic since he was twelve, only crossed it on the way to Rome or Madrid, chasing light like the lunatic he had been when he was younger. And now he lived so far inland that he could not even imagine the sea's noises: Painter-in-residence at a university on a city-straddled, dull river that did not even live like water.

"I love you," Jessie repeated.

"I heard you the first time," he said, touching her hair appre-

ciatively, "but my wife warned me against celebrity hounds. Where the hell's the ocean?" He could see before him only a horizon defined by a line of dunes, shaggy where they met the sky. He felt suddenly lonely, an alien in this place created by the taste of the grandfather of Bill's rich wife—a piece of the world that, when he was a boy, had been labeled "Restricted." Except for the glare from the house itself, there was not a light in any direction as far as he could see, only the ragged unraveling of the dunes under a livid sky. Even the noise of the waves on the shore seemed to him all at once empty. He longed for the swarming beach of his own childhood: the Moxie bottles, the *knish* venders, the screaming of lost kids and old ladies bouncing in ecstasy on the ropes; the tangled lovers frozen by the sun and walked over carefully by the middle-aged or sprayed with sand by the feet of children. "*This is the shore?*"

"It must be over those dunes," Jessie assured him, sensing his melancholy. "But it's not *your* ocean. That's a hundred miles north and thirty years away. Poor Howard. For pity's sake, forget what I've been saying; it's only that I keep thinking of Lucille and Elaine. Enjoy yourself tonight. Take one of those young imbeciles, if she'll have you. How much longer can you even look at twenty-year-olds without being sadder than you are funny. I don't really care as long as I know that— It's just— Take her out by the ocean that isn't even yours and—"

"Shh!" he interrupted. "Holy cow! Look at *that!*"

The drive had led them circuitously past the two tennis courts and wound now beside the pond, around which they could see the white gleam of some fifty statues, shoulder to shoulder, emperors and fauns, athletes and nymphs, carefully mutilated to look like recovered antiques. This time Howard stopped so short that Jessie pitched into the dashboard, and leaped out of the door without even setting the handbrake. "My God, what do you think you're doing?" she screamed, reaching across to stop the car that slowly but inexorably rolled toward the pond.

"They're marble, real honest-to-God marble," he yelled back, fondling the hairy backside of a satyr. "No plaster casts in the Castle of Otranto." It had begun to rain, and over his shoulder

Jessie could see the slender, high-breasted Venus, who straddled a shell in the middle of the pool, glisten with the drops; her arms were stretched out and down in a strange pose, her head tossed arrogantly back. "Aphrodite at the gates. It's a good omen." Howard whooped helplessly, abandoned to laughter, while Jessie yelled, "For pity's sake, don't be a child. What's so funny? Get back in the car, you fool. You'd think you'd never seen—"

"I'm back," he said, settling in beside her, a little damp where he pressed against her arm. "It's only that I never— For God's sake, it's Bill himself. But look what prosperity has done to him."

It was Bill at the door—unmistakably Bill, playing squire between the carriage lamps—waving a martini glass in their direction and yelling what must have been a fond greeting.

"Four bedrooms, three baths and two Fords," Howard murmured pointlessly, laughing again until he could no longer drive, and they tumbled out of the car.

Three years (was it only three since they had sat in the Piazza del Popolo choking on Campari-soda?) had done something cruel and comical to Bill. It was not merely that he had grown fat; that could happen to anyone, but he had grown fat so ludicrously. He looked somehow as if he had been blown up by a kid with a bicycle pump: the skinny, bewildered face he could never shave properly still skinny but *inflated*, the half-starved body of the first thirty-five years of his life ballooned out under the unbleached linen jacket.

When he tried to kiss her, missing her cheek as always, Jessie was tempted to squeeze him hard, keep squeezing until the air was forced out and he had shrunk to size again.

"Well, I never . . .," she managed to say finally, while Bill thrust a hand out under her arm to shake Howard's.

"You never did. You really never did." He stood back and patted his belly proudly. "I'm not rich for nothing. Imagine it, me rich." He raised a plump arm with visible effort to indicate his domain. "Turrets—ivy—Venuses—sixty-two bedrooms— We even have a ghost, but unfortunately it's Sunday, and on Sundays, ghosts don't—" He seemed to remember for the first time the dark-haired girl with the pale eyes who stood beside him. Ev-

erything about her was tiny except for her breasts, which, thrust forward by her sway-backed stance, gave her the overweighted air of an eighth grader who has not yet grown up to her body. "And this is the secret of my success, Molly-o, my wife." A deprecatory grin fought to take shape in the tight, round blank of his face. It was impossible to say if he changed expression when he added with scarcely a pause, "Did you know Irving's dead?"

Molly reached a hand toward Howard first, very brisk and businesslike, though her pale eyes fluttered coyly. They were green, he thought, if they were any color at all. "Why don't you make up your mind," he wanted to say—to the eyes not to her.

"Place," she said, greeting him by his last name, as if she were a man. "Delighted. I recognized you from the picture in *Harp'er's Bazaar*." She was wearing a black turtleneck sweater without sleeves and an oxford gray linen skirt, just the right outfit, Howard knew, to make Jessie feel overdressed and deliberately snubbed.

He touched her cheek lightly, ignoring the proffered hand. "Ward," he said, echoing her manner. "Delighted, too. I recognized you from the picture outside Minsky's."

"I said Irving's dead," Bill repeated mildly. He was scratching himself under the left buttock as always.

"Minsky's has been closed for years. She's too young to have heard of it," Jessie put in by way of information.

"For Christ's sake," Howard hissed.

"What do you mean 'for Christ's sake'?" Jessie turned on him, glowering, and ignoring the girl who was now pointing her breasts in her direction.

"I'm very pleased to know you, Mrs. Place. Why don't we all move in out of the—"

"The hell you are," Jessie said in a half-whisper, still looking away from Molly toward the invisible sea and the storm that moved toward them now like a blow.

"Pardon me?" Molly asked uncertainly. Her lids moved up and down, up and down frantically over the ambiguous green.

She must be awfully proud of those thick, dark lashes, Howard

thought, poor kid! And he put an arm around her shoulders to reassure her.

"Oh, for pity's sake," Jessie exclaimed, looking at her at last; then grabbing her away from Howard, gave her a hug and a large kiss. "You're only a child. I love you, you know. I love all of Bill's wives. . . ."

"He only had *two*," Molly answered, moving uneasily in Jessie's embrace. "I mean, I'm the second, that is—"

"I said Irving's dead," Bill tried again. "Irving's dead. Irving's dead." He was constitutionally incapable of shouting, but he pounded Howard's back with a pudgy hand to claim his attention.

"She looks just like Elaine," Jessie whispered in her husband's ear. "It's obscene. She has no right . . ."

"I know he's dead," Howard answered Bill at last. "Irving's been dead for years. I keep telling him so. He never got out from under the influence of Hans Hofmann. Might as well cut off your arm at the armpit. But where the hell is he? I haven't seen—"

"No! No!" Bill insisted, dancing up and down in exasperation. "He really died two nights ago. A heart attack. He was supposed to be here tonight, with Esther—"

"Sarah, you mean," Jessie interrupted. "Sarah was the one who—"

"I thought it was Esther. I always get those names— To hell with it. The important thing is, he's dead."

"You mean *dead*," Howard yelled, registering at last. "Irving? Irving Posner? Dead?" Though he was talking to Bill, he had grabbed Jessie, digging his fingers into her shoulders hard enough to hurt.

"He died two nights ago, the fourteenth, at 7:30 P.M. in the arms of his wife of a heart attack." This at least, Molly obviously believed, was a solid fact to be hung on to, to be asserted in the midst of references that baffled her and slippery insults. This was what she knew, what she could tell the others.

But what does her voice remind me of, Howard asked himself, that polite, private-school New York voice, so unlike the voices

of anyone I ever knew or hated or slept with, the voice (he had it at last) of F.D.R., a Fireside Chat!

In his distress, he had not noticed Marvin and Achsa, who were just then coming toward them out of the house, Marvin as usual carefully not looking at his wife, who followed him fiercely, like a dog on a fresh scent—her eyes hot and bulging in the leathery, shrunken face.

"Esther notified us that night. The funeral was to be held at the Beth El Synagogue at—" Molly tried to continue; but Marvin leaned down toward her from his immense height, almost touching her pony-tail with his chin.

"You sound like a newspaper," he said in his flat, unpleasant voice, "the kind of newspaper I never read. You ask me how I know what kind of newspaper it is, if I never read it; I answer I know that you read it, and knowing you I deduce—"

"Excuse *me*, Mr. Aaron," Molly retorted with schoolgirl iciness, "I wasn't aware that you were eavesdropping." He had withdrawn again to his full height, lifting his dark, melancholy face back into its customary loneliness; and she had to tilt her own head back perilously to glare at him.

"Why don't you call me Marvin," he said. "That would make me more uncomfortable yet."

"For the love of Jesus, shut *up*, Marvin," his wife cut in. "You're not even drunk." She was not much larger than Molly; but she did not try to engage his eye, shouting instead with all the hopeless rage of one whose worst enemy has remained out of range for twenty years. At that moment, she caught sight of Jessie and screaming her name, flung herself with equal though opposite passion from her husband toward her friend.

"Achsa! Achsa! What have you heard from Lucille and Elaine? You never write." Jessie did not lower her voice; she had not so much forgotten Molly as not yet taken her into account.

"I have no time for writing. I'm working full-time again—in the same office with Lucille. You should see her; she looks like a ghost—skin and bones and eyes, that's all. For the first three months she had shingles, while that bastard Leonard—" she stopped to glare at Bill who scratched himself absently, then con-

tinued, "while her dear husband Leonard (the divorce hadn't even gone through) was on a Caribbean cruise, a premature honeymoon."

"No, no, no," Jessie protested. "He wouldn't dare."

"Oh, wouldn't he? But she's doing very well now—psychiatric social work. You remember that's what she was doing when we were all in Minneapolis—when Leonard was working on his first book, the proletarian one. Proletarian!"

"For Christ's sake, Achsa—Irving is dead. Have a little decency." Howard found he still had his arm around Molly, in a gesture of solidarity he had not really thought out.

"I know. Thirty-eight years old. A tragedy for the Jewish people. It couldn't be worse if we lost Sholem Asch. I never liked that little twerp Irving, and you know it, Howard. Why should I be a hypocrite now? The last time we saw him he was going to *shul*—couldn't even stop to talk. He's a faker, Howard, admit it. First a Marxist, then a Jungian, then an Orthodox Jew . . . What's the use, Howard; dead or alive, he was a fake!"

"How do you do, Achsa? I'm very glad to see you again after all these—"

"Ah, you see, he's offended because I didn't kiss him. Aren't you, Howard? Isn't that sweet! You always were a *much* sweeter fake than poor Irving." She pecked him meaninglessly on his nearest cheek, her eyes swinging feverishly from face to face.

"And you, Marv? How are you?" It was an idiotic thing to say out of his complicated feelings, but Howard could think of nothing else. It was Marvin who had first taken him to an art museum, Marvin who had made him read Marx, and now—

"Sufficiently lousy." He inclined his head wearily toward Howard, without visible affection. "But she's right after all, though God knows how." He avoided his wife's name, using the simple pronoun in referring to her. "A mountebank, a bankrupt comedian. At least you've learned to come to terms with your badness and be popular. To be a bad avant-garde painter is only ridiculous; it gives aid and comfort to the enemy. To be a producer of bad kitsch (is there any other kind?) is solidly contemptible, *solidly* contemptible."

"Thank you, Marvin," Howard answered, scarcely realizing that he imitated Marv's toneless Brooklyn voice as he spoke. "The tribute of your envy is worth more to me than being chosen for the Biennale." It was the simplest truth again, and he wished there were some way for Marvin to know it.

"Oh, please come *in*, everybody, come in and have a drink. Please. All you intellectuals I've read about all my life, and you don't know enough to come in out of the rain." Molly urged and pushed them inside, aided by Howard to whom her stupidity and her not-quite green eyes seemed equally charming. But he dropped behind to sit on the marble lip of the basin in the entry hall, out of which a thin stream of blue water rose and fell, balancing a crown of spume at the highest point of its thrust. Around the rim, there were potted palms, seventeen of them, and in the shallow pool, great slow golden carp hung as if asleep. He could see into it, but was not yet ready to enter the hundred-and-fifty-foot living room, with its balcony for musicians and the mirrored walls at either end that reflected back and forth into a haze of planeless images the ivory buddhas, the carved oaken bishop's throne, the twisted iron lamp stands, and the faces of Achsa, Marvin, Jessie, Bill Ward—so improbably there.

The rain banged stupidly against the leaded window panes with the inset coats of arms, not steadily but in irregular spasms, as startling as the lightning which exposed the shuddering pines and an agitated gray strip of sea. In the center of the room, a long black table, sustained by carved hamadryads, was covered with bottles and trays of canapes arranged in spokelike patterns chiefly yellow and red. The room was oppressive after the chill of the rain, full of smoke and dead air and rock-and-roll music, blaring mercilessly from a pair of speakers in opposite corners of the ceiling.

"Hi-fi," Bill said, waving toward the speakers, and "Plover's eggs, fried locusts," indicating the table. "Believe me, it's the hardest buck I ever made."

"It's too damn hot. I can't stand it!" Achsa screamed, and grabbing a Cinzano bottle, hurled it through one of the windows

at the point where, above a scarlet shield, the motto read: *Ad astras per aspera.*

"Real vermouth," Bill commented, while Molly giggled, obviously feeling that this was more like what she had read about writers and painters in novels, more like a real party at last.

The sound of breaking glass brought Howard into the room and startled the couple on the other side of the table into turning around. They had stood clutched together heedlessly when the others first came in, not really dancing but making little rubbing motions against each other in time to the music. It was Leonard and his new wife, Howard knew even from the backs of their heads, his black and a little grizzled, hers blond, the hair hanging straight to her shoulders. She was very slim and a little taller than Leonard even in her flat ballet slippers; and when she whirled around, her eyes still large and her mouth a little open, a large gold cross swung lazily between her breasts. Leonard had grown a beard and looked handsomer than ever, almost masculine despite his short legs and tiny feet, his soft, girlish body.

"Disgusting!" Achsa said, not troubling to make clear whether she meant the cross, the beard, the public caresses, or all three; and in the confusion of kissing and greeting that followed, no one cared. It was a full ten minutes and a drink later before they could hear each other saying what they had all been unable to stop thinking: "Thirty-eight." "Poor Irving." "Dead."

"Thirty-eight," Jessie managed to make herself heard above the rest. "Thirty-eight! The youngest of us and the first with a reputation—the first one whose name anyone knew but *us*. We're all a little dead now. What are we doing here anyway? Why don't we lie down like good corpses and—"

"What else was there for him to do?" Achsa asked mercilessly. "A painter who couldn't paint any more. It's better than praying, isn't it, more honest to die!" Irving had been her lover once, Howard was aware, for a little while and for reasons never very clear either to them or anyone else, but whatever tenderness she may have felt had long since dissolved in her scorn. "You don't *have* to die from a heart attack. It's an act of cowardice. Look

at Marvin. He's had three already, three attacks, but he doesn't die, and what kind of a hero is he?"

"You're kidding," Jessie cried out. "For pity's sake, you don't mean to say that—"

But at the same moment Howard was saying, "He wouldn't give you the satisfaction, Achsa. You're his life preserver." Turning to Marvin, he winked, but looked away again, seeing the sudden terror in Marvin's loosened lip and staring eye. "Old revolutionaries never die," he went on, just to keep talking. "If the last Trotskyite in America conked out from a twinge of the heart, it would be sacrilege or *lèse-majesté* or something. . . ."

"It's the difference between angina pectoris and a coronary," Molly said, blinking sagely at Marvin, who stroked his upper left arm and said nothing. "I used to work for a doctor and I—"

"Nuts," Achsa interrupted her. "It's the difference between Karl Marx and Moses Maimonides. Irving already had one head in the womb and that's as good as a foot in the grave. After the womb, the tomb! And what a womb he picked to crawl into, with a *mezzuzah* at the entrance and two sets of dishes. A womb with two sets of dishes!" She apparently found this very funny, barking in amusement, though no one joined her.

"In 1935, he was the most talked-about young painter in America. 'A way out,' they said, a way out of the Cubist academy. And for the last five years he never touched a brush—defeated!" Howard filled his glass again and gulped it down, feeling very sorry for himself. But why *himself*? He hated martinis and only drank them, too quickly and without restraint, when he wanted to humiliate himself. "I loved him." Perhaps that was it; everyone must feel somehow guilty at the death of what he loves. He could see Irving's pinched, dark-bearded face before him, peering out from behind the tortoise-shell glasses as from behind a mask; and playing whatever part he had temporarily chosen, sage or revolutionary or prophet or kindly old uncle, with all the furious commitment of a ten-year-old. "I loved him."

"Is it true that just before he died, he was so . . . so . . . ?" Once into the story which she had heard but not really understood, though she had laughed when Bill had laughed, Molly

wanted to retreat, but could find no way out. "That he was so . . . so *Jewish* that he wore a cap when he drank martinis."

Why did no one laugh this time, when the time before everyone had just about— They all looked at her in an absolute silence that not merely reproached but annihilated her; and when she searched for Bill's eye, he was pretending to be too busy with Achsa's glass to have noticed either her gaffe or the silence which followed it. "What I mean is—" she tried again, and quit.

"He had the dignity of failure," Marvin said suddenly, not to rescue her, but because whatever causes moved him a head and a half above the others had brought him to a point where it was time to switch sides. "He had the dignity of failure. Nothing else matters." He might have been addressing Howard more directly than the others, but it was hard to be sure. At any rate, Howard wished that he did not have to remember (what Marvin drunk and more proud than distressed had confided in him one night years and years before) that Marvin had paid for Achsa's abortion when she had been pregnant with Irving's child. They had been married only a couple of years then, and Marvin had gone off to Haiti on a Guggenheim, his last public recognition, leaving Achsa behind; when he had returned, Irving had a new girl and was broke as always.

"The dignity of failure," Achsa screamed, closing in on her husband as if she intended to bite him. She, at least, was drunk, and her glass tilted as she moved, sending most of her just-replenished drink over her dress front. "You should be an expert on that, Marv, a real expert. But I don't understand it, not even after twenty-one years of postgraduate study. Just how dignified is it to be the only spokesman of failure, *pure* failure, in a room with a painter who's going to be one of the five Americans in the next Biennale—"

"Four," Jessie corrected her, while Howard winced.

"Plus the winner of the Prix de Rome for literature—the only poet in America married to an escapee from a convent!"

For a moment, it seemed as if Eva's mouth were shaping a protest, but she contented herself with pressing it against Leonard's sleeve, snuggling up to him even closer. She had not yet said a

word audible to anyone but her husband, only touched him from time to time incredulously, as if she were afraid he was not really there.

"Not to forget our host, the author of *All Buttoned Up*, which not only got the Drama Critics' Circle Award and has been running for sixty-seven weeks—but even won him as a special bonus Molly-o, complete with the highest class sanitarium in the marshes of New Jersey." She spilled the rest of her drink on Molly, bowing exaggeratedly in her direction.

"Hardest buck I ever made," Bill repeated, giggling. He obviously thought it a classic remark—and was resolved to find Achsa merely funny.

Molly could not resist adding, "And he would have had the Pulitzer Prize, too, except that one of the judges was Ed Shorr, who everyone knows is—"

"And what do you have to offer, Marvin, to this distinguished group of repentant Marxists on the make besides the purity of your principles? Twenty-seven years of being called 'America's most brilliant young critic' till 'brilliant' and 'promising' get to be open insults! Twenty-seven years of conversation everyone admires and no one remembers! Twenty-seven years of nail-biting and insomnia—including twenty-one years of me. Let's not forget that, Marvin—twenty-one years of *me*. No book. No prize. No new bride. Only me. How do you like me, Marvin? Am I a dignified enough failure for you?"

"You see what I mean," Leonard cut in with his shrill, somewhat fruity voice. He was not addressing the rest of them really, only Eva, continuing the one dialogue that was important to him. "Conjugal love. Punishing each other for punishing each other. Eating each other, because each one is sure the other's the only true poison. This is just what it was like with me and—"

"Say Lucille's name and I'll leave this stupid party!" Jessie cried out. "How did she poison you? How? By letting you sit year after year writing poems no one would print, while she worked for twenty-five lousy bucks a week. By letting you weep on her shoulder after each of your 'little affairs' and wipe away your tears until the next one. By—"

"Shh! Jessie, for Christ's sake," Howard hushed her.

"Why should I shh? We used to sleep in the same bed, Howard, don't you remember? The four of us, you and I and Lucille and Leonard. Now we can afford a bed apiece and we wouldn't fit anyway! You remember whenever we used to come to Minneapolis, we'd talk all night until we couldn't keep our eyes open, daring each other to believe we'd be famous some day, read and dreamed about by young kids like us lying four in a bed. This is some day, Howard. How do you like it? Leonard used to read his poems and we'd argue, scream at each other. Was she poisoning you then, Leonard, was she? What happened, for pity's sake? Maybe she couldn't look at you any more with such big eyes, as if you were a god, the way this poor thing looks at you now. Lucille *knew* you, Leonard, like you knew her, and what is there to do under such circumstances but forgive one another?"

"Forgiving is a poison, too, Jessie," Leonard answered mildly. "It's habit-forming. After a while, you get so you can't do—"

"Put down that poisoned toothpick, Leonard! Bernie's here and no one hurts my Jessie. At least, not without a marriage license!" They had not heard Bernie Levine's Cadillac pull up on the cinders outside or seen him and Beatie come through the open front door; but he bounded now from one to the other, the last guest, fat and bald and incredibly ugly, kissing Jessie, lifting Achsa high into the air, thrusting a finger into Bill's middle to see if it was real, patting Eva's behind. "What a *tuchas!* What a *tuchas!* You're a lucky boy, Leonard. What a poet can do with this, I don't know, but a cloak and suiter like me— When do we eat?" He was dripping wet with perspiration and rain, his hundred-and-fifty-dollar silk suit wrinkled hopelessly, his Panama hat with the multicolored band (that he had hung on an empty candle holder) sodden. "What a dive! Incredible, huh? I suppose you have gin in the fountain, no? And they call them poor fish! My God, the heating bill alone! Where's Beatie? I know I had some woman with me when I started, and she didn't hold the car door open for me when we stopped. It must be my wife. Ah, there she is—naturally, with that Howard."

Beatie had been standing behind him through his whole act,

grimacing and shaking her head back and forth in her cradled hands to express mock horror; but now she smiled the slow, sweet smile Howard remembered out of her too-big, noble head under its fashionably cropped gray bob.

"I'm tired. Four kids and it's the summertime. But you, Howard, you're just beautiful. And you're famous, my oldest son tells me, my fifteen-year-old, imagine it! He saw it in *Time* magazine. Kiss me already." Pulling her close, Howard saw the tears in her eyes; they had known each other since they were three. "It's terrible, no? And it'll be worse before it's over. What an idea!" She gestured with her head to indicate she meant the whole party. "What can you expect in such a house. No self-respecting ghost would haunt it. Absolutely. Ah, poor Howard—and Jessie! Jessie!"

They embraced warmly, not speaking. "I'm really tired, I didn't realize it. What a summer—my mother-in-law's been with me for three weeks. And wet—and hungry. Why don't we eat? Thanks. Thanks." She waved off Bill who approached with a glass. "We stopped on the way for a drink. To tell you the truth, for three drinks. That's why we're late."

"It's Beatie's fault," Bernie said. "She can't stay away from the stuff—it's an affliction. An unhappy marriage, and, unfortunately, her religion forbids divorce." He kissed her on the neck, ducking under her blow.

"Are we ready?" Bill asked, turning to Molly.

"Ready for what?"

"To eat. It's nearly half past nine."

"*Eat!*" She said the word with exaggerated contempt, and leaning toward Bill, whispered furiously into his ear.

"O.K., O.K.," he said soothingly. "It doesn't matter. I'll hold off the wild beasts. It's just a question of looking them in the eye, showing them which one of us is master. Listen, let's all have another drink."

"But I thought—" Molly began.

"Thought," Marvin repeated. "Make no extravagant claims."

"I thought we were going to—Why don't you urge them, Bill. They're your friends."

"Urge them?" he asked, scratching his behind again in a mild

panic. "But what should I urge them to— What do you mean?"

"You don't even remember. And it was going to be the High Point!"

"The 'High Point'?"

"We were going to *swim!*" There were tears in her eyes, darkening the elusive green.

"But it's raining, sweetie," Bill protested, "and it's cold and late and—"

"It's *best* in the rain. Don't you have any spirit of adventure? I thought that—"

"What? What?" Bernie shouted. "She wants to swim? The young lady wants to swim? So let her swim; it's a constitutional right. I personally will grease her down. I have in the back of my car—"

"*You'll* swim with me, won't you, Bernie?" Howard found himself resenting the "Bernie" (he had been coldly "Place"), as he resented the way Molly-o snuggled up to Bernie now, one breast nudging his solar plexus.

"Me? You mean *me* swim? Excuse me, my dear, this is another question entirely. After all I just ate two olives in my last martini. According to all the best scientific thought, I'll have to wait at least an hour. Otherwise I'd be glad to oblige."

"Really, dear, it's out of the question," Beatie added with a heavily matronly air that even Howard could scarcely abide. "It is cold. It is late. Some of us have to worry about bursitis. Besides, we have no bathing suits. Bill didn't say anything when he called about—"

"But that's just it. We don't need any bathing suits. It's no fun if it's not spontaneous. We have a lovely private beach, and I thought we would all just slip out of our clothes and— It was going to be so *exciting!* I mean, I remember when I was in college, a bunch of us kids sneaked off to a quarry with a case of beer and— Oh, everybody was so beautiful that night, so free and beautiful in the moonlight! Don't you *see?*?"

"Moonlight!" Howard could not help breaking in, though he did not want to seem to stand against her with the veteran wives and their scared husbands. "Just look at the moonlight!" He

pointed through the splintered pane to the sky whose murkiness an occasional lightning flash showed without dispelling.

"It'll be wonderful! We'll be like ghosts in the lightning. *Nude ghosts.*" Noo-oo-oo-oode, she said it, lingering dreamily over the vowel of what was for her a magic word. "Nude ghosts."

"And now *listen!*" Howard persisted, hushing them, so that they could hear the noise of the sea on the rocks, the blows so quick and frenzied that they made a single, unbroken sound. "The surf! It would tear you to pieces."

"Oh, how can you all be so *sensible!* I'll never be *that* sensible even if I live to be a hundred. You're not just old, you're dead, *dead*, all of you! I wish your precious Irving was here. At least, he *knows* he's a corpse!" and shedding clothes as she ran, she headed out the door into the rain and toward the roar of the ocean. Her brassière she flung back over her shoulder as she disappeared in a final, theatrical gesture.

"Bravo!" Marvin shouted, clapping his long, thin hands together, "Bravo!"

"What'll I do?" Bill asked, starting to follow her, and then, turning irresolutely back. "It's the first time we— Should I—"

"You can show me the silent-flush toilets I've been hearing about for three months," Beatie answered, taking Bill's arm. "Leave her alone. She'll be all right. Don't you men know *anything*, even the second time around?"

"I tell you Elaine was never like this, I mean—that is—" Bill stammered to silence, flushing and Beatie drew him off.

"Well, I can go wading at least, while my wife consoles abandoned husbands in bathrooms." Bernie had taken off his shoes and socks as he spoke, and was heading for the marble fishpond in the entry hall. "This is more my speed. Oy! it's cold!" He jumped out, then with a shudder back in again. "Look at me! Free and beautiful." His nose, broken once and never properly repaired, gleamed with sweat, and a stubble of the tough beard that refused to look shaved darkened his fat jowls. "Do the fish care that they have no bathing suits? Young fish—they should worry! They tickle. Come on in, everybody. Join me! Hoo-hah! I'm F. Scott Fitzgerald!"

But no one even listened. Leonard and Eva were necking again, she utterly abandoned to an inner rhythm of desire that had nothing to do with any event in the external world, he glancing up occasionally, vaguely troubled, in search of an O.K. from his old friends. It's insulting, Howard thought; bad enough the girl is so young, but he doesn't have to play the naïve bridegroom himself (with a beard!), force the rest of us into the roles of father or uncle, called on to approve or cast out. He leaned over to kiss the hair of his wife, who sat on a low hassock before him, her head bent forward onto her knees; but he felt self-conscious, aware that any public love-making between two middle-aged people, shrunken or bulging, must appear a parody—a little obscene.

At least he was not Marvin, Jessie not Achsa! Marvin, with no one to talk to, drank in silence, pacing the room nervously, and Achsa, drifting behind him without being aware she followed, matched him drink for drink, though neither said a word to the other and each kept his eyes averted. Suddenly, Howard realized that the darkness before the house to which he had pointed an instant before was blazing with light, through which the slowing rain ran stitches like a sewing machine gone mad. Someone (it must have been Molly-o through all her tears) had switched on a bank of floodlights under the eaves. But *why*, Howard wondered; and he pressed his face against the window, staring out into the pointless glare.

Molly had apparently not gone swimming at all, but was sitting quite naked on a stone bench just at the verge of the last dune. She was set in absolute profile, her knees drawn up before her, her arms braced behind, and her head thrown back so that her hair fell onto the stone seat. Howard had not realized that it was so long and full, caught up in the pony-tail she had worn. In that excessive light and at that distance, all color was bleached from her body, leaving her perfectly black and white. She appeared no more or less real than the marble Venus, which also stood in Howard's direct line of sight, naked above the lily-pads and under the faltering rain. Tintless and eyeless, without motion and with her hair down, Molly seemed the twin of the statue, another Aphrodite.

It came to Howard all at once (and he laughed aloud) that the statue must actually be a *portrait* of the girl, an advertisement, as it were, a forecast of coming attractions. Yet it was impossible to despise her; for once out of her clothes, she seemed not disproportionate at all, the line from instep to thigh to breast a flawless stroke expressing utter complacency. This planned and artificial pose beside her marble double was, Howard sensed, her answer to their condescension and scorn; and though he relished, he could not help resenting, too, the dumb, triumphant rebuttal of her young breasts and thighs. He knew she was aware of his watching her as surely as he knew his wife to be watching his watching; and he turned away with a sigh.

In ten minutes, Molly was back with them again, having apparently re-entered the house by another door. She had changed into riding breeches and a man's plaid shirt, but was barefoot. "Soup's on," she said, grinning, her recent tears quite forgotten; and lifting her arms over her head, she stretched until the shirt was taut from nipple to nipple. She could not have been wearing a brassière.

She led them into the adjoining dining room, where around a floral centerpiece the color of fresh blood fifteen-foot-high silver figures of hooded monks each held up a white candle whose light set the other silver winking and flashing. "That's Oswald," Molly said, tapping one of the monks on his tonsured head. "He's my favorite. Isn't he a darling!"

Dinner began eventlessly enough and was probably excellent; but everyone was too drunk to taste it and the food splashed and fell and slipped from their open mouths with almost demonic malignity, staining tablecloth and ties and the fronts of dresses. "Just look at you," Achsa kept hissing at Marvin, pointing across the table in horror at the sauce stains on his white shirt, while her own trembling spoon sprayed her with melted butter or her lip-sticked wine glass dripped one more contribution to the purple blur in which it stood.

Only Eva did not drink, raising to their occasional half-

mocking toasts ("The Critics' Circle Award!" "The Biennale!" "The Prix de Rome!") a large, depressingly white glass of milk. Bernie, who sat beside her, kept pretending to shy from the glass, raising one hand to his eyes as if to shield them from the glare. At one point he reached over and dipped her cross into the milk ("To see if it's real gold," he explained); at another, he tossed an olive surreptitiously into it "to take off the curse."

"Revolt!" he kept telling her. "This is the last symptom of Momism. Let go of the titty, Eva."

"Ay-vah," Leonard pronounced it for him, irked at the way Bernie kept kneading his wife's arm.

"As long as you're unhealthy!"

There was a different wine with each course, clumsily uncorked by Bill, who grew more itchy and silent as his embarrassment mounted. Over the vichyssoise and Chablis, he tried his favorite quip for a final time, but nobody even looked up to acknowledge it. "Hardest buck I ever made!"

Howard had managed to sit beside Molly; but she had unfortunately drenched herself with some almost acrid sandalwood perfume after her imaginary swim, and he was actually relieved (his head aching and his eyes watering) whenever she rose to go down to the kitchen in pursuit of something forgotten or overlooked. She walked with greater and more perilous dignity each time, until the trip which brought her screaming back with a bloody rag wrapped around the forefinger of her left hand.

"Oh, Bill, I cut it! I *cut* it!" she howled. "I'll bleed to death all because of your silly friends and their silly socialist ideas. Everybody *knows* we have help! What could one person do with a house this size, even just for a summer place. Why did I have to send Ellen and Janet to the movies? So I could chop my finger to pieces? It's snobbery, that's what it is, silly socialist snobbery. They *like* being servants and I like having them and I— Oh, Bill—it's all over my pretty shirt—I'm all *bloody*, Bill." Looking down at the red-stained rag she screamed again.

"Really, I— Really, I—" Bill's mouth opened and closed, opened and closed, as if he were trying to say something, though it became clear finally that he was only laughing soundlessly.

"Bill just sent them away to protect them from Bernie," Howard began, feeling somehow that what would surely seem a good joke when they were sober they might as well laugh at now. But Molly was crying again. "I can't help it if I need servants, can I? Don't make me send them away again. *Promise!* I'm just stupid, that's all. Oh, Bill!" She held her wounded finger under his mouth until he made kissing noises in its general direction, glancing all the while at Marvin to see how strongly he disapproved and making indistinct remarks about the superiority of Band-aids to kisses.

Marvin, on the other hand, looked happy for the first time that night; his long head moving up and down like a horse eating sugar from a child's hand, he began to speak. "Sending servants away, this is more than a symptom of insecurity; it is clearly a symbolic action—but symbolic of what? What is the objection to a maid from people who have sold out their principles, their former friends, their past. To make jokes for hire about everything you believed in once, this is apparently all right, as long as it's in verse." He bowed toward Leonard, showing his crooked yellow teeth in the nearest thing to a smile he could manage. "To sign a loyalty oath to a state with a law against miscegenation in order to keep a job teaching schoolboys to draw vases and plaster casts, this is kosher." He nodded at Howard. "To live off a stupid mother-in-law who believes in 'Art,' but fortunately does not know what it is—who would object? Not our host, who objects to servants, or should I say to displaying his servants to former comrades."

He leveled a finger at Bill, who half-rose to object. "Marvin, it's not that simple. This is a matter that—"

"Quiet!" Marvin said, and Bill bowed his head like a child rebuked. "Why not a servant? This is a G.I. reaction. In every petty-bourgeois conformist, there is a G.I. for a conscience; and what is a G.I.? A man who will kiss ass but not *salute!* And why not? Ass-kissing is a private transaction, but saluting is public, official; it means that you know your masters know that you know that they are your masters. Do you follow this?"

A chorus of "no's" answered him, though they had all stopped their buzz and clatter to listen. He was the only one of them able to compel the attention of the others.

"Still, there's something in what he says," Bernie added. "Personally, I—"

"Please, *I'd* like to say something," Bill interrupted, holding his hand up like a boy in school. He still had the corkscrew in his clenched fist. "Marvin, you don't understand. About the servants, I won't say anything because it's—well, I just won't. And as for my mother-in-law, whatever help she gave me and for whatever reasons, I don't need it any more. With what I made on *All Buttoned Up*, I'm independent—for five years now I can—Never mind. You know how many people have seen *All Buttoned Up*?"

"What difference does it make?" Marvin answered, smiling condescendingly. "I guarantee you more saw *Abie's Irish Rose*. You still have room to sink, Bill."

"But I didn't write any *Abie*, Marv. I won't say that most people who come to my play don't go out laughing at Roderick the revolutionary bum. But the gimmick is all the time I'm laughing at them for being sucked in. I get them coming and going, Marv, don't you see. I—"

"I won't stand for it," Marvin broke in, pounding the table before him with his loose, hairy fist until the glasses rattled. "I warn you I won't stand for it. I drank your toasts to the Prix de Rome, the Critics' Circle Award, but only on the understanding that no one plays games with me. You're petty-bourgeois conformists. You're whores. O.K., these are the facts. Now, I'm not too proud to sit with whores; I'll even let a whore buy me a drink. But only on the condition that he wears his identification ticket: I AM A WHORE—and underneath it, I LIKE IT! or How UNHAPPY I AM! This much is optional; but no *principles*, for God's sake! That's my department. You have everything else: money, prizes, new wives, admiring coeds. I don't resent it. Only admit what you are. I warn you, I won't stand for it!"

"What'll you do, Marv?" Howard asked mildly. "Write an arti-

cle?" He pretended he could not hear Jessie who whispered at him from across the table, "The man is sick, Howard. For pity's sake, he's sick."

Marvin refused to dignify his challenge with an answer and Bill, nonplused, had sunk back into his seat, his mouth working soundlessly. The rest stared at each other, unwilling or unable to pick up the conversations they had dropped to listen to Marvin, when Eva's voice rang out astonishingly distinct in the hush. It was the first thing they had heard her say. "Do you understand all this, darling?" She blew into Leonard's ear, bit the lobe gently. She had refused to sit anywhere except beside him, despite Molly-o's outraged protest.

"Certainly."

"But it's ridiculous, darling."

"Of course, it's ridiculous, but that's not the point. This is a language for unhappy people—a way of pretending that unhappiness is virtue. Once, I talked this language, too."

"But now you're happy and sensible, aren't you, Leonard? And lucky, too, because it *pays* to be happy in America, to give up crazy talk about classes and conformity and discuss the New Criticism or transsubstantiation or how many angels can dance on the head of a Thomist poet." Marvin glared first at Leonard, then at Eva's crucifix.

"Why do you all *listen* to him, then? Why do you sit there apologizing to him, as if he were a fuehrer or something?" Eva had risen to her feet, brushing a long, blond lock of hair out of her eyes with the back of one hand. She was very red, and her lower lip trembled as if she might break into tears at any moment. "Don't you see, he's not only silly, he's vicious—a diseased man tearing at everything that's healthy. I suppose you all read his asinine article 'Fanny Freud at the Harpsichord,' and snickered over it, and thought how smart he was and how smart you were for knowing it. Well, Leonard doesn't care a hoot for what Mr. Marvin Aaron says about his poetry. After all, Leonard writes it, and Marvin is just a mad dog baying at the—at the—whatever it is." Her voice, tremulous throughout, broke, and she retreated behind her glass of milk again, scarlet and trembling.

"Take a tranquilizer," Bernie advised her. "Beatie swears by them."

"Never mind," Howard said. "It's refreshing to find a wife ready to defend her husband. But Leonard needs no defense. Who reads what Marv writes any more? Not even us . . ."

He had, of course, read carefully through Marvin's attack on Leonard, as he read (and the rest with him) each rare piece he wrote, his writing obviously blocked now except when malice moved him to snarl at some younger and more successful friend. It had become clear to everyone long since that Marvin would never write the long epic poem on the Wobblies or the immense study of American culture in four volumes that he had talked about all his life. But how to explain this to the girl with her cross and her glass of milk; how to make clear the sense in which Marvin (though only two or three years older) had been the father of them all, the model for the insolence and involution that they had learned from him to think the hallmarks of the revolutionary intellectual. "Bodhisattva," they had called him when they were in high school; and they had quoted his remarks to each other, passing them from hand to hand until they were worn out—their chief inheritance.

Howard knew that Marv clung to the old counters still, the inviolable clichés of Marxism, not because he believed in them, but because they had once been tokens of his power to compel love and respect. In a sense, he held them in trust for them all, their one-time papa, now the keeper of the museum of their common past. He felt an obligation to insult Marvin publicly, as Marvin in the first place had taught him to do, to respond to Marv's insults of him as if they mattered. It was the last possible gesture of respect; to have greeted his sallies with silence, would have been to reveal pity, and that Marvin could never have stood.

" . . . Not that what Marv wrote wasn't true and in a way deserved. Anyone who can write

And I have dreamed of golden girls,
Whom seeing men forget they die . . .

is asking for the hatchet."

Eva started to rise again, boiling up toward speech, but Howard hushed her. "Never mind, dear. Drink your milk like a good girl. Who takes Marv seriously, a man who writes from rage and out of weakness in a magazine no one sees, except the wives and friends of the author he's giving the treatment. What do you call it again, Marvin, that journal for boys who never grew up? *Peter Pan, Boy's Life, Our Sunday Messenger?*"

"*Contempt*," Achsa answered for her husband. "*Contempt*, you clown!"

"Ah yes, *Contempt, or the Fountain of Youth*. No forty-year-old ex-post-Marxist can read it without sobbing to his image in the mirror, 'They're playing our song!' Believe it or not, I think Marvin really knows that an attack from him under such auspices helps a book, and since he's fast becoming a kindly old man—"

"Listen, Howard—"

"Listen, Howard—"

"Listen, Howard—"

Marvin, Achsa and Leonard, all three beginning at precisely the same moment and in precisely the same way, collapsed in laughter, while Jessie groaned aloud. She thinks I'm showing off for Molly-o, Howard told himself; and maybe I am, maybe I am. . . . But Molly was not even listening, staring instead at her finger tips which were drumming the tablecloth beside her plate, apparently without her permission. Her fingernails like those of her toes were painted silver.

"Quiet, *please*," Bernie announced into the hubbub, pounding his glass with a fork. "Everyone's too melancholy. I'm going to tell a joke!"

"I thought that's what Howard was doing," Jessie said, as Beatie murmured, half to herself, "Now they'll first get melancholy."

"Well, since you all insist, reluctantly I'll do it. It seems that one day Mendel meets his old friend Sidney on the street and says to him, 'Sidney, where've you been? For two weeks I haven't seen you in the office, on the street . . . ?' 'I've been on my honeymoon!' 'Don't kid me,' Mendel says, 'I personally know you've been married already for—' 'Twenty-five years,' Sidney

finishes. ‘A *second* honeymoon. To celebrate our twenty-fifth anniversary, we went back to the identical hotel in Atlantic City, took the identical room—’ ‘And how was it?’ Mendel asks. ‘How was it? It was *wonderful*, exactly the same as twenty-five years before. Wonderful.’ ”

“Wouldn’t you say this is a little long, Bernie?” Achsa asked. “Couldn’t you—”

“Sh! I guarantee you it’ll be worth it. It’ll take another five minutes and you’ll love it. Where was I? So, Sidney says to Mendel, ‘Mendel, it was perfect. Everything exactly the same. We had the same waiters; we ate at the same table, the same chopped liver, the same chicken soup, the same—’ ”

“Do you have to recite the whole menu?” Achsa broke in again.

“Excuse me, Achsa. You have no joy de veever, no *ding an sich*. ‘Everything,’ Sidney says, ‘was the same. We went on the boardwalk in the same chair; we ate the same dinner; the orchestra played the same music; at the same time, we went back to the room, jumped in the same bed and—’ ‘Even that part was the same?’ Mendel asks. ‘The same as twenty-five years before?’ ‘Exactly!’ says Sidney. ‘With one little difference.’ ‘Nu, what was it?’ ‘Afterwards, instead of my wife sneaking in the bathroom to cry, I went.’ ”

“That’s funny, I suppose?” Achsa inquired scornfully when Bernie stopped. “The sort of thing you tell your customers to get them in a mood for buying ladies’ underwear?”

“I’m laughing,” Bernie said; and he was, though the others sat looking at each other in dumb horror, except for Molly who rose, brushing the crumbs from her thighs. “It’s just *silly*,” she said. “I never heard a story with less point.”

“If this is going to be a wake,” Leonard put in, pale with anger, “and it seems only proper to have one now that we’ve all died laughing, let’s make it a really low-down one. Improbable as it seems, I know a joke, too—even worse than Bernie’s, but shorter at least.”

“I can never remember them,” Molly said. “I hear some really cute ones, but—”

"Please," Jessie protested, rising, too. "Enough is enough." She looked across at Howard for support, but he said nothing.

"What are you afraid of, anyway?" Leonard persisted. "I'm not going to give away any secrets, only tell a joke. Well, anyway, this man and his wife were in bed together, making love, when suddenly he says, 'Did I hurt you, darling?' 'No,' she answers, 'why do you ask?' 'You *moved!*' he says."

"Oh, Leonard, that's *nauseating!*" Jessie cried. "It's exactly what I knew you were going to—" Howard had the uncomfortable sense that she somehow felt as if she were protecting him. "What are you trying to—"

Even Eva was moved to whisper, "Oh, sweetie, *don't!*" burying her head between Leonard's neck and shoulder.

Howard felt obliged to say something, too, but he was oppressed by a coldness that sank from head to chest to loins. He could feel himself shrivelling as he sat there under the too-hard light, staring down at the cigarette butts ground out on the greasy plates and smelling the dying odor of Molly-o's perfume. To reassure himself, he patted her firm haunch gently as she stood beside him.

"This is the ghost at the feast, isn't it?" Leonard screamed suddenly after having seemed to subside. His voice rose even more shrilly, almost soprano now. "The specter that's haunting New Jersey—and Westport—and Paducah—and Brooklyn! Why are we kidding ourselves. We've reached the age where it's possible to lie beside a woman who's moved you every night for twenty years and feel nothing—*nothing!* This is the critical fact of our lives; but we don't tell, do we? Not in Bill's plays or my poems or Howard's paintings—only in Bernie's crummy jokes. Ha-ha!"

"How can you write a poem about nothing? How can you even talk about it unless you're too drunk to know any better. Well, I'm drunk and I'm telling you. Irving isn't the only victim of heart failure. It's the disease of us all without benefit of doctors: failure of the heart, failure of the genitals, failure of love." Though he was standing now and Eva had slumped far back in her chair, he had kept holding her hand all the while he talked, palm pressed to palm like a couple of high school kids. She tried

to pull him down when he paused for breath, tugging at him and saying, "Oh, hush, please, hush."

"I'll be damned if I'll hush and let them sit around for the rest of the night sniffing at you and me. They're *sniffing* at us, can't you see! What have we betrayed? We're happy, that's all, and they can't stand it, each with the evidence of his suffering at his side. For better or for worse, in sickness or in health, till death do them— My ever-loving wife! Well, I broke out of the trap and so did Bill; that's what they'll never forgive us for. That's why they're sitting there right now not saying a word but cooking up nasty little stories about us that will last through a whole year of parties. Am I right, Bill?"

Bill was sound asleep at the head of the table, his head cradled in his arms, and the corkscrew, symbol of authority, lying beside him. Achsa, who sat next to him, lifted his head by the hair to reveal a look of childlike bliss, then dropped it again scornfully.

"Hell's bells," Leonard continued. "I'm out of the trap, the not-so-tender-forty-year-old-hell-for-breakfast-every-morning trap. But you wouldn't know about it, would you? Oh, no, vaginal jelly wouldn't melt in your—"

"Please, Leonard darling," Eva implored him.

"O.K., I'll be through in a minute. Well, I know about it anyhow. I know what it is to lie side by side with a woman you've made love to so many times you feel sick and silly when you add up the total—and each of you dead to the other. Such things may not happen to you, Achsa and Marvin, or you, Jess and Howard, or you, Beatie and Bernie; for you the honeymoon may last twenty years. You'll just have to take it on faith that it happened to me, to me and Lucille, who—"

"I told you, Howard, if he mentioned my friend's name in the same room with that silly little girl, I'd—" Jessie wove around the table and stood behind her husband's chair, straddle-legged, her fists on her hips.

"What do you want me to do? Hit him? Should I knock him down for you, Jessie, because he offended divorced American womanhood?"

"She may not have been good enough for you, Leonard," Achsa

interrupted him impatiently, "but she's so much more of a woman than you'll *ever* be a man, that it's a scandal. You and your masculine-protest-type beard that doesn't fool anybody for one minute! She was a splint for your poor feeble masculinity, Leonard, a splint. Don't think that I don't know that before her, you couldn't even manage to—"

"Achsa, what's the point of dragging up all the bedroom gossip you ever heard? All I'm trying to say is—"

"I wasn't the one who started bringing up bedroom gossip, Leonard, but since you began it, I'll just finish. I'm sure this will all be very educational for your new wife, who's been getting your special version of things. I'm sure she'll appreciate knowing that without Lucille you couldn't even—"

"Hell's bells, I'm not trying to justify myself against Lucille, Achsa. I'm a bastard, I know."

"You can say that again," Achsa screamed triumphantly, working her way slowly around the table to put an arm around Jessie's waist. "Now tell us exactly what *kind* of a bastard you are. I have a few little anecdotes to contribute that you may have forgotten."

"All I mean is, what else can you do when—"

"You can shut up, Leonard. So much you can always do." Beatie moved as she spoke toward the other two women, finally taking up a position on the other side of Jessie, though not yet touching her—like a last reserve. "We love you still, Leonard, believe it or not; but don't you see what an offense it is to bring that poor, sweet girl here and sit smooching with her. I wish you a hundred good years with her and a dozen children, but only—"

"Poor, sweet girl", with that ridiculous voodoo charm around her neck. I tell you—"

"Never mind the voodoo charm, Achsa. We all have our idiosyncrasies and that's not the worst. Leonard, all I say to you is this: go sit in a corner like a good boy and hold your Eva's hand, but leave us grownups alone."

"Beatie, I can talk to *you*. You're no fishwife. What do you *do*, Beatie, when you lie side by side with somebody, two people seeing each other naked, knowing each other by heart, as they say,

but without love. It's not tolerable, Beatie. What do you *do?*"

"Lie side by side with the dignity of failure. There is no love." Marvin rose at last with the air of one contributing the final wisdom; he spoke more slowly than any of the others and from his greater height, very pale above their heads.

"Marvin, I tell you right now that if you say 'failure' or 'dignity' again tonight, I'll—I'll throw a water pitcher at your head. I'll—I'll—" Beatie put an arm around Achsa now, soothing her, while Jessie on her other side squeezed her waist without a word. "All right," Beatie kept saying over and over, "all right, all right."

Coffee had been set before everyone, and tasting it now, they discovered it had grown cold. The cognac they dutifully swallowed without tasting, but no one was capable of getting any drunker. Suddenly they had nothing more to say, and they looked away from each other in pained silence, like Leonard's perhaps legendary husbands and wives, wondering what dead and irrecov-erable passion had left them stranded in an association that without it was merely absurd.

"Oh, let's *dance!*" Eva cried at the top of her voice, sensing that only a shout could break so deep a silence. She made her way to the hi-fi set in the mirrored room, fiddling with the knobs until music assailed them again from the corners, even louder than before. It was Billy Holiday, singing without vibrato and in ec-static pain:

Love's just like a faucet,

It turns off and on.

Love's just like a faucet,

It turns off and on . . .

It was as if not their images only, bedraggled and dim-eyed, but the sound, too, was reflected from glass to glass across the im-mense room. Bernie and Leonard had carried Bill in, sagging be-tween them, to deposit him in the bishop's chair, where he rolled over once then sank back snoring. Jessie, Achsa and Beatie sat side by side on a sofa, leaning their heads together and whisper-ing like conspirators, while Marvin pulled down book after book from the wall shelves, glancing briefly and disapprovingly in each.

Molly-o had flung herself flat on the floor, gazing meditatively down between her breasts, her back nestled down into a white bearskin rug. "I'm too warm—and too full—and I drank too much," she announced mournfully, unbuttoning two more buttons of her shirt and smoothing her breeches across the hips.

Bill once dropped, Leonard had taken Eva in his arms, and they were moving together again in their slow un-dance off in one corner. No one joined them.

Sometimes when you think it's on, baby,
It has turned off and goooo-ooone . . .

"We have squash courts in the basement," Molly said without much conviction, snuggling even more sensually into the white fur, "and ping-pong tables—and sixty-two bedrooms, if anyone is inclined to—"

"The only game that interests me is craps," Bernie said. "If some of you gentlemen—"

"What about Guggenheim?" Marvin asked.

"Guggenheim!" Achsa cried scornfully. "Next it'll be charades."

"I can't play any of those category games," Molly said, looking quite pleased with herself all the same. "I'm too stupid."

"The only thing I ever played in my life," Howard put in from the doorway, where he stood gulping the damp, cold air by way of therapy, "was croquet. I was at Yaddo in '49, and all the time we weren't at the race track, we were playing—"

"You mean that stupid game for children with wooden balls?" Achsa asked.

"I never knew a child with—Isn't there some danger of splinters—" Bernie began, whooping with delight, but Achsa cut him short with a glare.

"Were you at Yaddo *too?*" Molly-o inquired, slowly easing herself over, then rising to sit on her feet like a Japanese. She looked admiringly at Howard as if she had just discovered his most dazzling distinction. "Bill was there once. Long, long ago, in '38."

"That's not so long ago," Howard objected. "It was that year that the Museum of Modern Art bought my—"

"I was six years old," Molly said, casting her eyes down modestly.

"Oy! Oy! Oyl!" Beatie cried out. "It's the only answer. Oy! Oy! Oy! Imagine it, six years old."

"Bill says that in '38, they used to play *nude* croquet!" Molly lingered over the vowel of the magic word again. "You know, at night when the middle-aged prudes were asleep. There were lots of interesting people there that year. I don't remember their—"

"Marianne Moore and T. S. Eliot," Marvin suggested. "They'd look good at nude croquet."

"And Henry James," Jessie added. "That long ago he was in pretty good shape—and Henry Wadsworth Longfellow."

"We have a croquet set somewhere, don't we, Bill?" In her mounting excitement, Molly ignored their quips. "Don't we? Don't we?" She ran over, silent on her bare feet, and shook her husband until he opened his eyes, staring at her unseeingly. "Don't we have a croquet set? We can play it *nude*, just like you used to do at Yaddo, can't we, Bill? You always told me how much fun it was. It'll save the whole party! Howard, why don't you go down into the basement and look just behind the steps. I'm sure you'll find it, in a big cardboard box that says—"

"Croquet, I'll bet," Howard finished for her, while Bill blinking sightlessly repeated, "Nude . . . nude . . . nude . . ." and fell back again onto the seat snoring.

"Oh, Bill!" Molly sighed, then turning once more to Howard, "Well, we'll just have to play without him. He'll be so sorry tomorrow to think he missed it!"

"It's raining again," Howard said by way of answer. He had been holding one hand outside the door, cupped under the dripping eaves; and he wiped it off now on Molly's plump cheek. "Wet! It's a bog out there. You'll have to make it water polo."

"Oh, we're not going to play out there, silly. We'll play in here where it's all comfy. Right *here!* Just move some of these chairs back—and turn off that ridiculous music, and we're all set." She snapped off Billy in the middle of a phrase:

When he starts in to love me, it's so fine and . . .

while Leonard and Eva stood gasping in the sudden silence, like a couple of sea creatures hauled out of their element. "Well, get it, please. Go and get it," she insisted, laying a hand on Howard's arm.

"Howard," Jessie warned him, rising to her feet. "Let's not commit ourselves to anything childish. Really, it's late already and we have a long way to go. I'm sure Molly will understand, and explain to Bill tomorrow, that—"

"It's only eleven-thirty-seven," Howard answered, consulting his watch. What he would have done if his wife had not intervened he was not sure; but there was nothing to do now but go after the croquet set and see what would happen.

He found himself wishing that it would not be there, but, of course, discovered it immediately (he who could never find anything at home) at the bottom of the steps where Molly had said it would be. He wrestled the clumsy cardboard box up the steep stairs, tearing a chunk of flesh out of the back of one hand on the door jamb and scarcely feeling it. "It's here," he said triumphantly, casting it down at Molly's feet and sucking the bleeding place. He liked the taste of his blood. "Strip already!"

He had thought he was joking, but before he could laugh or try to stop her, Molly had stripped off her shirt, leaving herself bare to the waist. "Think fast!" she said, tossing the checkered blouse at him and beginning to fumble with the buttons of her riding breeches.

Bill, still asleep, writhed on the oaken chair, calling out in a choked voice, "Please, please, please . . ." and Bernie rushed toward Molly-o in sudden panic, pulling off his jacket to put around her shoulders. "What is this? Minsky's?" he yelled, flushing and paling by turns. "We're not going to go through with this craziness, are we? What are we anyway, high school children who think you're only living when you take off your clothes? Howard, you tell her—you're an artist, naked women are your bread and butter. A joke is a joke, but I'm forty-four years old—*forty-four*—an underwear salesman."

"What are you getting so excited about?" Howard calmed him,

feeling superior to them all. "Let's be reasonable about this and—"

"Reasonable!" Molly flung Bernie's jacket contemptuously aside, and stepping out of her breeches now, confronted them in a pair of pale green pants (the color of her eyes), covered with tiny red hearts. "Well, what are we waiting for?" Her skin was smooth and tight, unmarred by child-bearing and unmarked even by the crease of brassière or girdle. On shoulder and thigh, breast and belly alike she was tanned the rich brown of one who turns patiently under the sun lamp, reading a fashion magazine and loving nothing more than her own flesh.

"Just because Bill married a *nudnick* who reads F. Scott Fitzgerald do I have to play the bohemian in my old age? Nude croquet! I don't know which is worse, the nude or the croquet! Listen, Howard, God knows we've got nothing to show each other by letting down our pants. Nothing we can be proud of. We're naked enough now, for Christ's sake!"

"Bernie's right," Marvin said, looking directly at Molly who had gone on undressing and stood now with her underpants hanging delicately from silvered thumb and forefinger; if he saw her, he registered nothing. "It would be more to the point to put on steel masks and lead drawers, to hide in all decency a nakedness we can no longer pretend is exciting or beautiful. All our compromises are hanging out, our withered principles dangling obscenely, our hairy ulcers worn on the outside. We can't even remember to button our flies!"

"My God, what *difference* does it make!" Achsa cried out. "Let's show what we can't hide anyway. Let these children look at what they have to become, what they are already, even if their mirrors aren't ready to tell them yet. I only wish I could take off my *skin*, too." Her dress and slip, her brassière with the discreet padding, the girdle she wore only to hold up her stockings, she had off in a moment, rolling them into a ball and heaving them at her husband's head. He did not even lift a hand to block them, but bowed as they went past him, smiling obscurely to himself. Achsa was almost completely breastless, skinny and yellow with

strange knobby knees and two scars across her flat, flaccid belly.

"You've all gone nuts," Bernie protested. "Nuts! I'm getting out of here before I find myself galloping bare-ass like a kid. What are we doing, grown men and women? Maybe it's kiddie night in the bughouse! Beatie, come on." He had picked up his rumpled Italian silk jacket, stuck his Panama on the back of his bald head. "Well, come on!"

"I'm not coming, Bernard," Beatie answered quietly, bending over and beginning to unlace the arch-preserved shoes into which her solid, unlovely legs descended without tapering. "I'm going to stay."

"You're going to play nude croquet—*nude* croquet? Are you crazy, too?"

"No—only a little drunk. Nude croquet, nude pinochle! Achsa's right, what difference does it make. Listen, Bernie, I manage to get one night in three months away from the kids—away from a house of flu and measles and diaper rashes. Well, this is the night and here I am and so I intend to stay at least till I've done something I'm sorry for. Do you understand? Excuse me, Bernie, but tonight I don't go home early."

"You're not only drunk," he screamed, pulling her by the arm. "You're crazy, plain, ordinary crazy."

"So, I'm crazy. I'd have to be crazy in the first place to have four children, to have your mother in the house for three weeks—in the hottest weather of the summer. Just let go of me, Bernie. *Let go of me!*" She turned on him her usually mild gaze now coldly ferocious, staring at him until he dropped his hold, then bent down to pull off her stockings. "Oy!" she exclaimed, reaching a hand back to brace herself just over the kidneys. "It's not easy, believe me." On her right leg she wore an elastic bandage, which she removed now, holding it up before them all. "In these things it's hard to be crazy! But varicose veins or not, I'm going to play nude croquet. Go home, Bernie, and when you get there, wake up little David and tell him his mama says—tell him I say—'Merry Christmas.'"

Everyone laughed and Molly shouted, "Hooray!"

"I'm giving you one more chance, Beatie." Bernie stood at the door, his nylon shirt dark with sweat, his coat dangling from his hand. "Come now or walk home. I for one will not—"

"Oh, go already," she sobbed. "Go! Can't you see I'm licking honey. A real orgy." She flung her head down on to Jessie's lap, weeping, her shoes off and her stockings dangling around her ankles. She did not even see Bernie, when, a moment later, he stuck his head back through the door, glowered around the room and, crying, "To hell with you all!" disappeared for good.

"Why don't you go, too?" Achsa asked, whirling on her husband; the light glinted from the knobs of her wrists and ankles, the bony outcropping of her pelvis. But Marvin was already undressing without a word, placing his black shoes, his socks with the garters attached, his pants folded neatly on a bookshelf which he had cleared by throwing the books on the floor. His limp, usually almost unnoticeable, grew more evident as he stripped.

Beatie meanwhile had staggered to her feet again, her shoes in her hand, and was making her way to the door, yelling, "Wait, Bernie. I'm coming. Wait! What am I doing here?"

"He's gone," Howard said, stopping her and whirling her around. He was one drink past the simplest truth, and so he lied to her without thinking, though he could still see through the window the red gleam of Bernie's Cadillac, in which he must have been sitting in sullen indecision and self-pity. "Don't worry. I'll drive you home later. It'll do him good to spend a few hours imagining you in a game of nude croquet."

"I don't know what got into me," Beatie sobbed. "You don't understand, Howard. He's in trouble, bad trouble, and I should stand by him. What else can a wife do but stick with her husband. It's her duty, isn't it, no matter what? I just don't know what got into me. I—" She dissolved once more into tears, Howard patting her head uncertainly, until all at once she looked up and winked. "It's all a joke, right, Howard? 'Duty,' 'husband,' 'stand by'—a *joke!* That's what's so hard to remember." She sat sprawled on a gilt and brocade chair that looked frail and ridiculous under

her, her legs spread wide and one hand on her heart. "I'm here and I'll play if it kills me. Jessie, come here and help unbutton me."

"Oh, good," Molly shouted, clapping her hands. "Good for you. You're a real sport!"

"Some sport," Beatie responded ruefully. "Poor Bernie!"

"And what about those two?" Achsa pointed to one corner where Leonard and Eva stood staring at each other mutely, their hands clasped. Then, even as she spoke, they began to undress each other, still without a word, moving in a slow pantomime that converted each unbuckling or tug of a zipper into a caress.

"And you, Jessie?" Howard turned deliberately toward his wife, wondering exactly how angry she was. He had already taken off his shirt and his T shirt revealed his fat chest, the thick blond prickle which covered it.

"Whatever you say, Howard." She was apparently going to try the tack of patient submission. "If you want me to join in this—"

"Certainly. You're only young once."

"And that was twenty years ago. Well—" She sighed a little; she had never looked so haggard, so ugly—her granulated eyelids pink and on her lip a slight rash left by her depilatory. "Tell me, Molly, is there a room on this floor where I could undress. I'm in poor shape for climbing stairs."

"A room! To undress!" Howard protested, feeling the request as somehow an intended rebuke. "But we're all going to be playing in here together in a minute, without a—"

"What harm does it do you, Howard? I'm willing to stand naked side by side with these young things and let you make comparisons, since it amuses you to torture yourself in this way. But getting undressed is a private matter for me. For pity's sake, indulge me a little. You can stay here with your—"

"I'll come with you," Howard volunteered, not quite knowing why.

"There's a room in there," Molly-o said, shrugging her shoulders a little contemptuously so that her breasts bounced. She pointed a tapering, tanned arm toward a door on her right. "A music room we hardly use any more."

Howard followed Jessie into the darkness, though she had walked off without even looking back in his direction and he knew he would be able to find nothing to say to her. When he reached for the wall switch, Jessie put a hand over it to prevent him; but she had left the door open a little so that in the mitigated gloom he could make out a dozen or so spindly chairs hunched under dustcovers around the walls, a love seat also protected from the dust, a piano, and behind it a harp.

"It's a harp!" Jessie said wonderingly, touching the strings lightly until they responded with a tingling and humming that filled the shadowy room. "Let's go home, Howard. Let's get out of here. You said before—"

"A ghost of a harp. No. It's too late now. We have to stay." He hung his pants on the harp, muting the strings. "Oh Lord, now that we've decided to stay, I've got to go."

"There's another door on the other side of the room. I imagine that somewhere through there—Can you see all right in the dark? Please, Howard, couldn't we just—"

"No, no, no. I can see fine." But he lurched and stumbled in the darkness, nearly tripping over one of the hooded chairs, and staggered finally into a lighted corridor, flanked by the john. He was wearing only his underpants, the ones with the repeated print of the *Pinta*, the *Niña* and the *Santa María*, a present from his in-laws which he had begun by hating, but had ended finding a good joke. He had not realized that he was quite this drunk.

Coming out of the toilet, he almost walked into Molly-o, who flung her arms around his neck and kissed him briskly. Her breasts were astonishingly firm despite their size, the nipples, not brownish or purple but really pink as a child would paint them, hard enough to press uncomfortably into his soft flesh. Jessie's, he thought dimly, had never been like this even when she was quite young. "Oh, *thank* you, Howard," Molly said breathlessly. "You saved the party. I thought we were going to have to sit there and *talk* all night. I had you all wrong. I—"

He grabbed her again, returning the kiss hard, his hands slipping down her back until he held her around the hips. Her mouth fell open all the way under his and he could feel her knees bend,

her body sag, though whether from passion or alcohol he could not tell. I'm just doing this to shut her up anyway, he told himself; it's so silly to let her betray those woman's breasts with her girl's chatter; I'm not even excited. . . .

He jumped suddenly under a resounding smack on his right buttock, and Molly skittered off smiling at him vaguely over her shoulder. Beatie stood behind him, grinning broadly and quite naked. "*Shmendrick!*" she said. "Big Brother is watching. Do you call this croquet?"

She had not called him *shmendrick*, Howard realized, since they were both fifteen and they had fumbled their way into what was the first affair for both of them, more like friends playing than lovers. Then Beatie had really fallen in love for the first time and —somehow thirty years had gone by! "Thirty years!" he said, perhaps aloud, but Beatie did not respond. He looked incredulously at her body, a girl's body when he had touched it last, now all at once full-blown, the muscle tone gone, the legs mottled blue-black with varicose veins—like someone's mother.

"I was just—" he stuttered. "That is—"

"Never mind," Beatie answered. "Before you lie to me, I believe you. Go find Jessie."

As he turned around confusedly, looking for a way back into the music room, Howard had the impression that the door through which he had come was closed softly, as if Jessie had been watching him, too, and was now withdrawing. But when he entered, she was lying face down on the love seat, her naked back rising and falling regularly.

"Are you asleep?" he whispered.

"Asleep!" she answered, rolling over. "You bastard, come here." She pulled him down on top of her, winding her arms around him with a ferocity that astonished him. She had not clung to him so desperately in years. "Oh, hold me, Howard, and for God's sake don't say anything. Tight, tight, *tight!*"

The love seat creaked under them, groaning in rhythmic protest; and the harp, set jangling by their movements, called a sympathetic response from under the top of the piano. The whole room buzzed and hummed and sang to the tempo they set, until

the noises of their bodies and their breathing seemed a part of a musical performance. Maybe the love seat will break under us, Howard found himself thinking, absurdly pleased at the prospect of so triumphant a climax. And then he was able to focus thought no longer. He could hear himself beginning a moan that mounted slowly to a real cry, drowning the mingled endearments and curses of his wife—a wordless declaration of terror and pain that was also a victory. And then it was over.

When they rejoined the others, they discovered that someone had set the record player going again (perhaps, it occurred to Howard, to drown out the embarrassingly unambiguous noises from the music room), and that the overhead lights had been turned off. Only two huge gilded and twisted seven-branched candlesticks illuminated the big room now, one set before each of the wall-length mirrors; and reflected back and forth from glass to gleaming body to glass, the fourteen points of light were multiplied to thousands. Leather-bound folios, opened to the middle and set spine up, did duty for wickets, and the others were already bent over the varicolored balls, mallets in hand. They had begun to scream insults and encouragement at each other, at ease in the friendly dark that camouflaged their bulges and creases and broken veins, their bunions and scars and grizzled hair. Only the smell of their naked bodies, triumphing over the cologne and perfume, could not be disguised, a thick, locker-room aroma that assaulted Howard at the entrance of the room so that he almost turned away.

After a while, he could begin to make them out more clearly through the flickering shadows: Leonard, vaguely hermaphroditic, pudgy and white; Eva, her cross falling just where her pancake makeup gave way to the slightly pimpled pallor of her skin (there was the mark of a bite on one small breast); Jessie, whose body was astonishingly younger than her lined witch's face, but whose gray below betrayed the red splendor of her hair; Achsa, tallow-yellow and without breasts; Beatie, marked with the red griddle of her corseting and verging on shapelessness; Marvin, sallow and unmuscled beneath the lank black hair that covered even his upper arms. He dragged more and more wearily behind him a

withered left leg, creased from hip to knee by a puckered and livid scar, testimony to the osteomyelitis that had kept him in bed through most of his childhood. Only Molly pranced and preened, secure in her massaged and sun-lamped loveliness. To each of the others nudity was a confession, a humiliation. Yet they laughed louder and louder, though no one knew precisely what he was doing; and the crack of mallet on ball punctuated their chatter.

Once, in the hubbub, Beatie drew Howard aside into the music room where he and Jessie had undressed. She was crying abandonedly once more, snorting and heaving and dripping tears that seemed somehow ridiculous above the expanse of her nakedness. "What's going to be with me and Bernie, Howard?" she asked, not in hope of an answer he knew, but because the question had to be spoken aloud. "He's in bad trouble, sicker than anyone knows—under analysis. Don't tell anyone, Howard, not even Jessie. He doesn't want— And I let him go away alone. He couldn't any more take his clothes off in front of these people, than—I don't know—than finish the novel he's been working on secretly since he was in high school. He weighs two hundred and seventy pounds, Howard—and he makes more and more money. He can't stand it! One of his things is he's got it in his head that he's smaller than other people, smaller than other men, I mean. You know what I mean, Howard." She pointed vaguely toward her own shaggy crotch. But why doesn't she say it out, Howard thought, annoyed and impatient; she's a little sick, too. "His doctor says it has something to do with being a Jew, circumcision, God knows what. And knowing all this, I let him go alone—alone! *Why, Howard? Howard, tell me something.*"

What did he have to tell her, what wisdom for all his forty-five years? He may have kissed her then, for he had come always to kiss women when he was at a loss with them—another laziness. But he could never remember later, though the feel and savor of it remained with him, into whose mouth he had melted so deliciously in that room, hers or Molly-o's. For a little later he had taken Molly, too (or had he only wished it?), into the darkened

music room, while Bill slept peacefully in the sacred chair and the rest howled around him.

All other episodes, however, faded into the confusion of the endless and pointless game, and into the mockery of Marvin which finally became its point. All the rest, varyingly drunk and skillful, slapped an occasional shot through an improvised folio wicket, or successfully cracked an opponent's ball away from a favorable spot; but Marvin, incredibly unco-ordinated, could do nothing. Sometimes, his leg buckling under him, he would miss the ball completely, denting the hardwood floor with his mallet or catching it under a Persian rug; sometimes the ball would skid off the edge of his hammer, trickle two or three inches to one side and maddeningly stop. Once the head of his mallet flew off at the end of a particularly wild swing, just missing Molly's eye.

After a while, they were all trailing after him, Achsa leading the pack, like the gallery of a champion golfer, roaring at every stroke, while Marvin said nothing, only more grimly and comically addressed the ball. The real horror, Howard felt, was that Marvin now *wanted* to smack the elusive object before him squarely through the wicket, to win the applause of his mockers. For all that he knew it to be nonsense, Marvin had been somehow persuaded that it *mattered*—reliving, Howard supposed, the ignominy of his childhood, when in the street and to the jeers of his fellows he had failed at caddy or stoopball or kick the can.

Drawing the stick back between his scarred and rickety legs, Marvin delivered a stroke finally with such force and imbalance that he toppled over onto his face. He lay there for a little while motionless, his pale, skinny buttocks twitching, while they all laughed and hooted and cheered. They could not afford to admit that it was anything but a joke.

Only Eva, who had screamed at him earlier, was moved to protest. "Oh, don't!" she cried, whirling on the rest with tears in her eyes. "Please, *don't!* Can't you see he's like a fallen king—a fallen king!" She took a step toward him, but could not bring herself to touch his pale, sweaty body, and ended covering her eyes with the hand she had reached out toward him in sympathy.

"A fallen king!" Achsa repeated contemptuously, sensing the others were slipping away from her, beginning to feel shame and pity. "Why don't you get up, your majesty, and say a few words about the dignity of failure?" She was hopelessly drunk and the efforts of Jessie and Beatie to quiet her only seemed to infuriate her the more.

"He likes it down there on the floor and in the dark," she continued. "Don't disturb him, my fallen king. He's working out canto twenty-four of the epic, volume three of the cultural history. Don't laugh so loud. You might wake him and American literature will suffer." She leaned over and tapped her husband lightly on the side of the head with the flat of her mallet. "Get up, Marvin, and try again. You're holding up the game. Get up!" He rose slowly into a sitting position, very pale and avoiding her eyes. "Maybe you'd like to make a statement," she insisted. "Maybe you'd like to—"

"Give me a hand, Howard," he said. "I guess I'm higher than I thought. I need a—"

"I'll give you a hand," Achsa screamed before Howard could move; and she held out the end of her mallet toward Marvin who made no move to lay hold of it. "Here, *take it!*" she cried in rage, drawing it back and smashing it full force across his left cheek. "How come you don't say 'Thank you,' Marv? Say 'Thank you' to the nice lady!" She hit him even harder this time on the other side of the head; and when he remained silent, harder and harder still, first right, then left, then right. She could hardly breathe. "Why don't you talk to me, Marvin? Why don't you *talk* to me? Say 'Thank you,' Marvin. Why don't you say 'Thank you'—"

Howard, who had stood by paralyzed with the rest, grabbed her under the arms, dragging her backwards with her feet in the air, and hanging on grimly though sweat had made her slippery and she leaned over to sink her teeth into the back of his hand.

"Smack her, Howard," Jessie advised him. "For pity's sake, slap her. She's hysterical." But he did not dare shift his hold, for fear of losing his purchase on her damp and squirming flesh.

Meanwhile, Marvin had risen very slowly to his feet, a thin trickle of blood running out of one corner of his mouth and down

over his chin. "I—I—" he began twice over. "I—" then sank to his knees, moaning. "Achsa," he yelled in terror. "Achsa, for God's sake, the pills in my pocket—my right—It's another attack, another—" His words burbled away into incoherence; then, grasping his upper left arm in his right hand and lifting his chin into the air, he cried out in agony and triumph—a cry so like his own on the love seat with Jessie that Howard thought for a moment he was only remembering it. Marvin's mouth was drawn back, his teeth shown in what may have been a smile, and his wordless cry may have turned again into Achsa's name before he pitched forward on his face again; but Howard could not be sure.

"Let me go! Let me go!" Achsa begged him, kicking and scratching. "What are you doing to him? My Marvin! Let me go!" He finally released his hold at the moment the overhead lights were switched on again, fixing them all in their nudity and helplessness, caught for one everlasting instant as in a flashbulb still.

Molly had begun to scream, a single note, high and pure, that seemed as if it would never end; and whirling about, they all stared at her in the hard light, even Bill, startled back to awareness on his bishop's throne. One arm concealing her breasts, the other thrust downward so that her hand hid the meeting of her thighs, Molly-o confronted them in the classic pose of nakedness surprised, as if she knew for the first time what it meant to be really nude.

The Dancing of Reb Hershl with the Withered Hand

It was in the time of my grandfather that the small but exceedingly prosperous Jewish community of M. was threatened with extinction. My grandfather had known as a young man many of the leading scholars of that town, and he would speak of them to me with tears in his eyes. "Such learned men," he would say ruefully, "no longer exist!" But grandfathers have always talked in this way, and I suppose such remarks must be taken only as the tribute paid by the guilty living to the dead, who in dying have made amends for everything. At any rate, one black year, just as the final preparations were being made for the Seder, which was held annually in M. at the house of the eminent Reb Yankele, a Gentile child was discovered lying under the table, quite dead. His throat had been cut, but he was otherwise untouched and he lay there with all the apparent innocence of childish beauty. What was to be done?

The dead boy was obviously part of a well-planned provocation.

If his body had remained undiscovered, soldiers would have broken into the house at the height of the Seder, led by the father of the boy, a peasant who may, indeed, have killed his own son in the drunken fury of his poverty, and then—woe! The nightmare of the Gentiles would have been proved a fact, and the burning, murder and pillage for which they longed as for a feast would have seemed to them only the execution of justice. It had been a difficult winter with much inexplicable disease and with food scarce because of the poor crops of the previous summer.

"But we have heard of this before," Reb Yankele protested; "it is a story which our fathers have told us. It is not something which happens but which is *told!*"

"Only what is told happens. Nothing which occurs for a first time really is." This was the way Reb Hershl talked when he was a young man, in riddles and for the learned; later, he was different, his words like a drink of water—refreshing to any throat. But at this time Reb Hershl was still only the favorite student of Reb Yankele, and he had been married for just three days. It was for this reason that he had protested bitterly against the decision of the Community, crying out that he wanted to stay with his bride, and to face with her whatever might come.

But it had been decided that the five men in whom was vested the wisdom of the Community must at all costs be saved from the destruction which no one could see any way to forestall. A hiding place had been secretly prepared long before against precisely such an eventuality, for rightly or wrongly the people of M. felt that they had been entrusted by God with the most learned men of their time in the so-called Court of Reb Yankele. It was to this secret place, a cave in the side of the hill only a mile distant from the town, that Reb Hershl was driven, along with Reb Yankele himself, Reb Eliezar, Reb Shloimo and Reb Nahum.

They made an oddly contrasting group, those five: Reb Yankele with his fine blue eyes and his serene face from which a white beard flowed like the waters of peace; Reb Hershl burly and golden-blond, but with those terrible black eyes from which the guilty (and even sometimes the innocent, for who can ever be sure) flinched; Reb Eliezar who was so old that he seemed always

half-asleep, or perhaps, as some said, already half transported into the World to Come. He was without flesh as the result of severe fasting and seemed scarcely to exist beside the fleshiness of Reb Shloimo, a man with two chins and a belly that bounced rhythmically as he walked. Reproached once for loving a glutton, Reb Yankele is said to have answered that only in his seventieth year had he learned that the fat man too has a share in the World to Come. Reb Nahum was the bitterest of the five, a prey to extraordinary rages. One cursed by God, he was accustomed to call himself, with his four daughters; but it was really his eternally renewed surprise at the evil of the world which kept him enraged.

A sixth man was also saved, though inadvertently, almost, you might say, by mistake. For it had been necessary to find a driver for the five Rabbis, the Torah, and the dead body of the Gentile boy, which they had decided, unwisely perhaps in their panic, to carry along with them. The driver had been selected by lot, and the choice had fallen on the *Roite Moishe*, a dull fellow with the flaming hair his name indicated, an ignorant, drunken lout, always the butt of his fellow drivers, scarcely a Jew! Such was the will of God.

It was Moishe who had rolled away the mossy stone which concealed the mouth of the cave, Moishe who had winked back over his shoulder, showing his mountebank's face to the trembling rabbis, Moishe who had gone in with a lantern to make sure there were no poisonous reptiles in the damp darkness of the cavern. The rabbis, grouped around the dead body of the boy which they had dropped on the grass, waited impatiently for the driver to emerge, but there was no sign of him, though they could hear him singing loudly inside.

"An irreverent idiot," Reb Nahum cried finally, "With his tavern songs in this hour of destruction." And he burst into the cave followed closely by the others. Moishe appeared to be dancing when they entered, his blood-flushed face and bright hair shining strangely in the light of the lantern, so that it seemed as if he were on fire. They could make out uncertainly the words of his song:

Dark rabbis, let the dance begin,
The dance you do not know you do.
The dance of David was his sin;
The dance you dance is you!

The dance he danced before the Ark,
Bathsheba taught him in the dark;
The dance you dance is you!

When Absalom hung by his hair
And danced his dying in the air,
God's mercy fell like dew!

Reb Nahum struck him a blow across the back of the head that knocked him to the floor. "Blasphemer," Reb Nahum cried in his metallic voice, "be silent if you cannot speak the words of God!"

"It's black magic, necromancy," Reb Shloimo screamed shrilly, wiping his bald head and his thick jowls with the back of one fat hand, for he was a timid man. "This fellow may be Ashmodai himself, sent in this blackest hour to complete our torments."

But Reb Yankele made a sign for quiet, while the driver groveled and begged for pardon from the floor. "What shall we do with this?" He held out in his arms the limp body of the Gentile boy, from which they all shrank back. No one could remember any longer why they had decided to bring it.

"A miracle," Reb Eliezar answered, in his ghost of a voice, in words that seemed spent when they reached the ear, as if they had traveled for a long time, "only a miracle."

"It is told," Reb Shloimo put in eagerly, "that once, I think it was in Worms, a child killed just so, and concealed just so beneath the table, rose at the Seder and sang with all the faithful like one of the living, so that the searchers were baffled. . . ."

"There are no miracles for us," Reb Nahum cut him off indignantly. "An age of miracles is followed by an age of plagues. This is the time of the left hand and not of the right!"

"Why are we talking like children of miracles," Reb Yankele said then. "The story of the dead child who sang we are not required to believe like infants. It is a parable, a way of present-

ing for the simple the mercy of God which no one is complicated enough to understand."

"It is pagans who ask for miracles. Wonders can be done by the magicians of Pharaoh as well as by the Masters of the Holy Name. We must believe without evidence, believe in the Silence of God. All else is worshiping idols."

It was seldom that Reb Eliezar made so extended an effort, and they all listened without a word, remaining hushed afterwards until Reb Hershl, unable to bear it any longer, cried out, "Why are we not worthy of a sign? For God's sake and not our own!" But he was embarrassed to find the redhead driver chuckling in approval from where he crouched beside him like a toad.

"Put the child in the center of the floor," Reb Hershl said to change the subject, "and let us see in this effigy of death the image of our own sons, how in a little while they will all be."

"Reb Hershl, forgive me, but you have no children yourself. Otherwise you would not talk so." Reb Nahum strode over as he spoke, and taking the body of the boy laid him almost tenderly on the floor in their midst.

"But I do have a wife and she, too, is already dead. It is only because I am a coward that I do not rend my clothes even now. She is my life and my wisdom and she is already dead. We should have brought the women with us."

"Ah yes, the women, the women!" The driver licked his lips comically and began to sing again with vulgar gestures a verse of the song he had sung before:

The dance he danced before the Ark,
Bathsheba taught him in the dark!

He held one hand up before his face, to protect himself from the expected blow, but no one paid any attention to him.

"We have brought the only true Bride of Israel," Reb Eliezar whispered, and turning to him, they saw he held in his shriveled arms the Torah in its dress of blue and silver.

"Your wife will be waiting for you in the World to Come," Reb Nahum said. "This is the virtue of women, to wait. And you

will not be without a footstool. Meanwhile, there will be other women to bear you sons."

"She is more worthy than I to be saved," Reb Hershl cried humbly.

"Why, then," Reb Nahum answered him, "do you thank God each morning that he has not made you a woman?"

"And is it not written," Reb Shloimo added, "that each man must think of his own wife as he utters those words of thanks." It was well known that the wife of Reb Shloimo was a shrew, a woman as passionately thin as he was placidly fat; and it was even reported that she beat him.

"This commentary is a mystery and not a joke!" Reb Yankele admonished him.

But Reb Hershl at least was not content to leave this, or indeed anything, a mystery. "When we thank God that he has not made us women, we think of our own wives certainly, for it is the difference which permits us to go to them as the Eternal goes to his Shekhina, so that what is above forever may be sustained by what is below for only a moment. . . ."

In the midst of Reb Hershl's remarks, Moishe had begun to sing very softly:

In the wood there is a rose,
That lives when all the roses die;
Who plucks her petals no one knows,
No one knows but I!

but Reb Nahum roared him down with the cry of "Silence!"

"It is the Passover," Reb Yankele reminded them, for, indeed, they had forgotten; and they sat down together to tell how they had come up out of Egypt, saying the bare words without the unleavened bread or the wine, or the bitter herb to memorialize suffering or the green to be the sign of hope. Only the child lay in their midst, his white throat gashed, as if the terrible old lie of the Gentiles were true, and that dead flesh were the Paschal sacrifice.

They repeated the text, of course, from memory, running through the service without any pause for exegesis, as if they were

in a hurry to be through, imagining perhaps the children squirming in their places as the odor of the feast wafted from the kitchen. There were tears in their eyes it is true at the words:

For not only one has risen up against us, but in every generation they have raised themselves up to destroy us; yet the Most Holy, Blessed be He, has always delivered us out of their hands!

But only when they sang the *Dayenu*, and paused with the verse: *If He had slain their first-born and not bestowed their wealth upon us, it would have been enough!* did the discussion begin, as was proper.

"I do not understand," Reb Hershl said softly, almost to himself, "why it is written here 'bestowed their wealth upon us,' when in the Torah we find simply 'plundered the Egyptians,' which is to say, stole from them like common thieves their gold and jewels."

Reb Shloimo answered first: "The looting of the Egyptians must not be interpreted as vindictive or senseless plunder, only as the assertion of a just claim. For surely the total treasure of the Egyptians could not have come to one-tenth of what was owing the children of Israel for their long years of labor in the brick kilns. It is a lesson forever that the laborer must be given his due hire!"

"Not so," Reb Eliezar whispered; "the plundering of the Egyptians can be understood only as the Ten Plagues are rightly understood, as a blessing disguised as a curse. Since each plague in depriving the Egyptians of what held them down in their mud, what bound them to the darkness, made it possible for them to know the Truth; for they also, they *especially*, were slaves in their own land to be freed by the Holy One Blessed be He. . . ."

"And yet the despoiling of the Egyptians," Reb Yankele went on, picking up the train of thought of the old man, whose voice had thinned to an invisible thread, "is the greatest blessing of all, greater even than the death of the First-born; for even the final curse of the Ten destroyed only a last human vanity. But that which was stolen from the Egyptians is not to be understood as

mere treasure but as the golden stuff of their Idols, as their lying gods themselves!"

"It is absurd," Reb Nahum roared in his habitual tone of wrath, "to complicate the Torah needlessly. God *commanded* the Children of Israel to spoil their spoilers, and it is not necessary to understand a command, only to obey it, to obey even when, and especially when, what is ordered seems repugnant to every-day morality. If to steal from the rich seems to you wrong, what of sacrificing your own son as was required of Abraham?"

He stabbed a nervous arm out toward Reb Hershl, who insisted stubbornly, "No! No! We will never understand the meaning of the act unless we begin by admitting it was *wrong!* In every enterprise no matter how noble, there are woven the threads of evil. This action was the ignoble revenge of a people who were still slaves in their hearts, and to call it the command of God is foolish pride. Twice the children of Israel fell into pride in the moment of their Going Out of Egypt, first in the looting, and second in their rejoicing over the drowning of the hosts of Pharaoh, who were also the children of God!"

"To hear the wisdom of Reb Hershl the angels of the heavenly host have descended to the sill of this world!" The extraordinary words appeared to come from the driver, but the voice was no longer his mocking snarl, and though each scholar attempted separately to step forward and hush him, they were incapable of moving a step toward him. "These words are true, but they are not the whole truth. Hear me, masters! If there had been no looting of the Egyptians, the Children of Israel would have had no gold to make the image set up in the desert while Moses was with God on Sinai; and this is the beginning.

"For if there had been no Golden Calf, the first tablets of the Law would not have been destroyed, and the second, or bitter, Law would never have been given.

"And if the bitter Law had not been given, the Jews would no longer have been chosen among the peoples; for the first Law was so gentle a yoke that the Seventy Nations who were also present at Sinai would have gladly accepted it.

"And if Israel had been no longer alone in the Promise, the Gentiles would not have persisted in their hatred of us.

"And if they had not persisted in their hatred, there would have been no pogrom today. . . ."

At this all of the others, except for Reb Hershl, cried out, "Abomination!" and Reb Yankele even held his hands over his ears.

But Reb Hershl pushed the absurd argument on to its conclusion, in a voice only half-mocking, for such riddling explanations were then his special vice. "And if there had been no pogrom, we should not have been in this black hole together, and the question we are asking might never have been asked, the answer never known. The reason that we seek is our being here to discover the reason."

Reb Eliezar, lifting his tired head, pleaded with him, "Please! Some jokes must never be made!"

And Reb Shloimo cried out, "This is the Adversary as I have said and he has bewitched our brother Hershl!"

But the driver, who had seemed truly to grow taller in the gloom as a shadow grows with the decline of the sun, went on in a terrible voice that hushed them all. "Reb Hershl is exactly right. If the end of reason is to know the limits of reason, all right reasoning must close in on itself, making a circle which is Zero, or God!"

At these words, Reb Nahum struck the driver across the face, a blow whose sound rang out in the dark cave, but Moishe did not flinch.

"If you do not like this interpretation, masters," he said, glowing now like a ruddy jewel, until the surrounding darkness seemed heated to an intolerable scarlet, "let us say, then, that the Israelites stole the Egyptians' gold so that you might today be blessed with the deaths of your children and your wives." At this, Reb Hershl raised his hand as if he, too, would strike the driver, but he let it fall again embarrassedly. "Let God be so good to all of us!" the *Roite* Moishe finished; and this time Reb Shloimo slapped him, the flesh of his hand quivering as it met hard bone.

"Or rather, masters, let us say that only what is robbed is given

by God, even as Jacob came into his portion only by robbing Esau. As it is written: to him who takes shall be given."

"This is the argument of the Serpent to Eve," Reb Shloimo screamed. "I knew him from the first."

"The words which you say are not written at all," Reb Yankele said firmly, and this time he himself struck the driver a blow whose force left his own body trembling and weak; but the driver did not move. Under the growing light and the rain of blows, his face had lost its malice and dullness, had become almost beautiful.

"Let us say, then, masters," he continued, "that it is for the salvation of Edom that the gold was stolen. For if Israel had been perfect, the Gentiles would have been lost forever. Venting their evil upon each other, they would have plunged forever into the darkness of Gehinnom; but turning their spite upon us, they are saved. For, even as Isaiah tells us, the Kings of the Gentiles cry out concerning Israel, 'By his stripes we are healed, and his chastisement is our peace!'"

"This is blasphemy," Reb Eliezar whispered hoarsely, the tears streaming down his cheeks; and lifting the staff on which he was accustomed to lean, with what strength remained to him, he managed to strike the final blow. But the driver only seized his nerveless hand as it fell again, kissing it, while Reb Hershl, moved by an impulse he did not quite understand, cried out, "Thou shalt be as the sandalwood, perfuming the ax which cuts it down."

He began to dance slowly, tentatively, more as if he dreamed he danced than as if he actually moved. But the driver, who seemed now to tower above and beyond the cave into a dimension where rocks have no reality, cried out like thunder, "Let the hand that has given no offense be withered!"

Looking down, Reb Hershl could see that his right hand had turned a scaly yellow-white, his scabbed fingers hanging limp, and the arm within his sleeve withered to a flaking stick. And now the man who they had thought was Moishe shone with an intolerable beauty that was like a blow and a consolation at once; and each, lifting his mantle, covered his head, except for Reb

Hersh^l who stood gazing down upon his ruined hand with the wonder of a child who thinks he does not know why he is being punished.

"It is Elijah!" Reb Yankele more sighed than said, while the voice of the revealed Elijah flowed once more over and around and within them: "Lay the blasted hand upon the throat of the child!"

Reb Hersh^l, moving still as in a dream, but now as if in one from which he feared at any moment to awake, knelt beside the dead boy, touched the open wound, lifting his withered arm with his still strong left hand, and the wound was closed up. The color returned in a warm flush to the cheeks of the child who was dead, and his eyes opened slowly, though for the moment he did not move.

At the cry of exultation that burst from Reb Hersh^l, each of the others unmuffled his head, looked, and shouted out in praise. First Reb Nahum: "The Lord may chastise me, but he has not given me over to death!" Then Reb Shloimo, "Thy mighty power didst thou wonderfully display on the Passover," followed by Reb Eliezar who murmured, "Let those who fear the Lord now say that his mercy endureth forever," while Reb Yankele shouted with mingled laughter and tears, "Therefore the limbs of which thou hast formed us, the spirit and soul which thou hast breathed into us, the tongue thou hast placed in our mouth shall worship, bless, praise, glorify, extol, reverence, sanctify and acknowledge thy overwhelming power, our King!"

Only Reb Hersh^l seemed unable to find a text after his first cry of joy and relief, but looked still in anguish at his unchanged and ruined hand. "Why?" he began, turning toward Elijah, who paid him no heed, but sang with all the simple blitheness of a child the last verses of *Hagadyah*:

Then came the Most Holy, Blessed be He,
And did to death the Angel of Death,
Who slew the slaughterer
Who had slain the ox,
Which had drunk the water,

Which had put out the fire,
Which had burnt the stick,
Which had beaten the dog,
Which had bit the cat,
Which had eaten the kid
My father bought for two pennies!
A kid, a kid, an only kid!

Reb Nahum had already run to the entrance of the cave, and had rolled away the rock that barred it, so that from within they could see across the plain to their village. It was already morning, for the night had passed without their noticing it. At just this moment, there arose the first shaft of smoke from over the Jewish quarter, while through the still air cries of lust and terror could be clearly heard, and soon within the calmly billowing smoke the nervous little tongues of flame showed palely.

A low moan moved from rabbi to rabbi as the wind moves, but the voice of Elijah was unmoved in its terrible joy, standing as a stone stands under the wind: "Wherefore I praised the dead which are already dead more than the living which are alive!"

Reb Hershl tried to begin the Kaddish, but he had said only three words when, attempting to raise his lifeless hand, he stuttered to a full stop, looking from his dead, flaking fingers to the greasy column of smoke on the horizon. There were no more cries. "Why?" he asked again hoarsely, "why?"

But Elijah cast back at him his own earlier words. "Why are we not worthy of a sign? For God's sake and not our own! Here is your sign: that you are not healed! Because in the hour of death you are able to reproach God for your right arm, as in the moment of resurrection, you are able to cry out against Him for the lives of your wife and friends, be assured that your wife is dead, that they are all, *all* dead! That which is to be hath already been and God requireth that which is past!"

As the prophet spoke, the ruddy light about him faded and his form shrunk in upon itself until it had become the absurd, insignificant frame of the Roite Moishe, while the unbearable music of his voice had blurred to the mocking raucous tones of the

carter (and who could have sworn that he was ever anything else!), "Besides, Rabbi, the physicians have to live, too. Is it God's place to compete with a poor Jew?"

At the word "Jew," the forgotten child rose to its feet like a sleepwalker, and began to sing in the shrill sweet voice of one trained for singing in the churches of the Gentiles:

Where is Hugh, my pretty Hugh
That played with me at ball?
The Jew's black daughter lured him in
Behind her garden wall.

She soothed him with a lully-lloo,
She stroked his golden head;
She cut his throat from ear to ear,
And laughed when he was dead!

He never said a single word,
He never made a moan,
The only sound was of her knife
That grated on the bone.

She caught his blood in a silver cup,
She caught his only tear.
Her father kissed his darling girl,
He called her dove and dear.

They threw Hugh's body in the well,
They weighted it with stones;
Green and oozy grows the moss
On Hugh's forgotten bones.

And when the springtime comes again,
The daughter of the Jew
Combs out her hair on the garden wall
To lure another Hugh.

Still tangled in a legend and a dream, he did not seem to see the dark, bearded men who stood about him until Reb Yankele shouted, "Why is this child alive and my sons dead!" He raised a

fist into the air as if prepared to strike down the boy, who began to yell in a passion of fear, "I want my mama! I want my mama! I want my mama!"

The rabbis had closed in around him, cutting off all the morning light with their greater height, until it seemed as if he were sealed again in the darkness from which he had just been delivered. "I want my mama!" he sobbed now almost incomprehensibly, and it was then that Reb Hershl opened a path for him through his colleagues, holding up his withered hand in his good one like a talisman or a banner. "Why not?" Reb Hershl said, as if to himself. "After all, why not?"

At this the voice of the carter swelled again to a climax of joy: "LAST YEAR YOU WERE SLAVES, THIS YEAR YOU ARE FREE!"

But when they looked around, neither driver nor prophet was to be seen, only the boy framed in the entryway as he ran off across the fields toward the burning village. At first the child ran headlong in terror, but in a little while he was pausing to pick a flower or to throw a rock at a bird—for it was spring and he was alive.

Then Reb Hershl began truly to dance, moving as the boy moved and as the wind moved past him, moving as the earth moved under them all and as the sun moved through the immaculate heavens toward the ending of another day. Only his withered arm did not move, hanging motionless in the midst of the motion, as if it were somehow the center and the meaning of the dance. But whether that meaning was joy or sorrow, knowledge or bafflement, or some strange marriage of them all, it would have been difficult to say. Certainly, I shall not try to say, though I have seen Reb Hershl dance that dance, as he danced it again every year after the Seder, when the old men commented on the *Song of Songs*. I went once to the village of M. with my grandfather, a little boy walking, it seemed to me then, forever along the road; while beside us in wagons and handcarts, on foot and on the shoulders of friends, the lame, the blind, the afflicted came in the hope of springtime to see the dancing of Reb Hershl with the Withered Hand.





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